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The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, Mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.

Courtesy : National Museum, New Delhi.

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Jeevan Tara Building, 7th Floor, 23A/44x, Diamond Harbour Road, Taratala, Calcutta 700 053

ADA Rangamandira, 109, J.C. Road, Bangalore 560 002

172, Mumbai Marathi Grantha Sangrahalaya Marg, Dadar, Bombay 400 014

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**Madras Office**

Guna Building, 2nd Floor, 304-305, Annasalai, Teynampet, Madras 600 018

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त्वदीयं वस्तु वाल्मीके
तुभ्यमेव समर्पये

*twadeeyam vastu Valmike*
*tubhyameva samarpaye*

This work, Valmiki, is yours and
I place it in your hands

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*One*

# The Epic Vision

Valmiki, universally accepted and acclaimed as *adikavi*, the first among the poets—at least in India and particularly in Sanskrit—was the first to discover a metrical expression of epic dimension and vision to match the emotional ecstasy of an elevated soul endowed with compassion and concern for all living beings. It was in such a state of identification of the individual with the universal that his immortal epic, the *Ramayana*, originated from his heart. Earlier he had equipped himself enough to produce an epic based on the qualities of an ideal man narrated by the celestial sage, Narada. Valmiki himself was a great sage, *Maharshi* by virtue of the penance he performed for a long time, but he was keen to have his terrestrial experience endorsed by a celestial authority adding right perception to his deep penance. On hearing from Narada that there existed a man right in front of their eyes who had all the virtues that a human being needs to benefit the entire humanity, the sage Valmiki started thinking of narrating the story of the man of his vision in a fitting and touching manner.

In order to assimilate the noble thoughts transmitted so kindly by the divine master, Valmiki took a stroll on the bank of the river Tamasa along with his disciple Bharadwaja. The river-water attracted his attention. The pleasant and placid movement of the waves seemed to remind the seer of the mature and the modest qualities of his hero. He visualised the purest ray serene of a pious man's mind reflected in the flowing water.

But the very next moment he saw a startling scene of a female bird suddenly separated from her partner who was mercilessly shot by a cruel hunter. He could not believe his eyes particularly because of the contrast he perceived between the crystal clear water reflecting a gentle heart and the act of a heartless hunter who shot at the pair of innocent birds engrossed in the legitimate pleasure of life for no fault of theirs and to no advantage for him either. His heart melted and spelt itself in metrical form which turned out to be the primordial sound for the world of poetry for generations to come. The wording is as follows :

मा निषाद प्रतिष्ठां त्वमगमः शाश्वतीः समाः
यत् क्रौञ्चमिथुनादेकमवधीः काममोहितम् ।

No—Thou shall not command any respect in society for years to come as you have shot dead one of the innocent birds engrossed in love.

The sage had turned into a poet. It was a pleasant surprise for the articulating ascetic himself that his feelings were so powerful that they found equally powerful medium for their manifestation. He was a little disturbed for a while that he was led away by his emotions and subjected himself to anger. He exclaims in a retrospective mood :

" किमिदं व्याहृतम् मया "

What have I uttered ?

But he reconciled himself to the situation as it was a spontaneous outburst of the inner voice and hence motivated by some divine will. The creator in him supported the stand and encouraged him to rise to the occasion and go ahead with his epic enterprise which he had at the back of his mind ever since he heard the glorious account of Rama and his march in search of harmony in life. He was also assured that Saraswati, the goddess of human expression, would stand by his side and guide him in visualising the events and eulogizing them

in proper form with epic dignity and secular simplicity. Thus the mission of immortalising the man of his vision gathered momentum and the time-honoured epic, the *Ramayana*—the *adikavya* of Indian literature, found expression in a memorable moment in the history of mankind when the master-mind was deeply absorbed in projecting the two basic human values—man-making and non-killing—for the betterment of humanity at large.

It is unfortunate that world of letters knows very little about this celebrated poet of worldwide repute except his epic composition, the *Ramayana*. The poet did not say much about himself in his work nor could history record any authentic account of his life—not even the time he lived in. He figures on two occasions in the course of the story as one of the characters and on both the occasions he was very brief and modest. When Rama visits his hermitage alongwith his wife and brother, on his way to Chitrakoota just to pay homage to him, Valmiki welcomes them with love and affection coupled with respect and reverence and utters just one and only word *asyatam* (be seated). He feels honoured when Rama sits for a while in his hermitage.

The other occasion when Valmiki appears and speaks as a character in his epic is in the *Uttara Khanda* (the appendix to the main story of the *Ramayana*). On hearing the entire epic sung by Lava and Kusha in his royal court, Rama invites Valmiki to his court and requests him to bring Sita also along with him so that she may prove her chastity in the presence of senior citizens and great sages. Valmiki accepts this invitation with a significant observation that Sita would certainly comply with whatever Rama expects her to do as her husband was her sole object of worship. Finally, while presenting Sita in the *mandapa* (Prayer hall) what Valmiki says about himself is of much relevance to us in understanding his magnificent background. He says :

प्रचेतसोऽहं दशमः पुत्रो राघव नंदन।
न स्मराभ्यनृतं वाक्यमिमौहि तव पुत्रकौ।।

बहुवर्ष सहस्राणि तपश्चर्या मया कृता।
नोपरनीयां फलं तस्या दुद्वेय यदि मैथिली।।
मनसा कर्मणा वाचा भूतपूर्वं न किल्बिषम्।
तस्याः फलमुपाश्नीय्यं अपापा मैथिली।।

I am the tenth son of the sage Prachetas. You belong to the great dynasty of Raghu. I do not remember to have uttered any lie so far in my life. I say that these two boys are your sons. I performed penance for thousands of years. I shall not accept the fruit of all my penance if there is any blemish in Maithili. I never entertained any ignoble thought, I never wronged any person and I never spoke any vulgar word—I shall derive the benefit thereof only if Maithili is void of sin.

These lines give us an insight into the penance and perseverance that Valmiki was practising throughout his life in order to present a valuable specimen of an ideal man and woman to be understood, assimilated and followed to the extent possible by the vast mass of humanity. Incidentally, the proclamation throws light on the confidence that Rama and other sages reposed on the sage Valmiki whose verdict had Vedic sanctity for them. In fact the immediate and invaluable outcome of his penance was the transformation of the Vedic vibrations into poetic excellence giving rise to an immortal epic like the *Ramayana*. This is the image of Valmiki we get from his own narration very humbly but effectively worded and addressed to the sublime soul like Rama whose march (*ayanam*) is the main thrust of the *Ramayana*.

The later versions of the *Ramayana* have, however, different stories to tell about Valmiki. The *Puranas* depicted the early life of Valmiki in a distorted manner which, though fascinating to read, does great damage to the great personality of Valmiki, an embodiment of penance. He was meditation personified and the sole object of his dedication and contemplation was **man**, a man who does not live all for himself but lives for others identifying himself with the composite culture of the cosmic creation. To say that such a great sage with an epic

insight into life, scientific bent of mind and a blend of aesthetic beauty and poetic excellence was, in his early days, a robber converted later by the seven sages into an ascetic may no doubt make an exciting story but there is no evidence in history to support it. But all the *Puranas* including *Padma Purana, Skanda Purana* and even *Adhyatma Ramayana* popularised this version and the common man today places Valmiki in the same perspective.

The word *valmika* literally meaning an ant-hill stands for deep meditation and poised state of penance. Valmiki, the poet, is a product of this penance. Kalidasa, a great admirer of Valmiki glorifies this aspect in his famous line in *Meghasandesa*. The Yaksha asks the cloud-messenger to look for a fantastic rainbow enroute :

वल्मीकीग्रात् प्रभवति धनुः खण्डमाखण्डलस्य

Have a look at that yonder ant-hill from which sprouts a colourful arch projected by Indra.

This rainbow is obviously a figurative image of Valmiki's poetic vision and epic grandeur. The seven colours of the rainbow so formed represent the seven *kandas* of Valmiki's *Ramayana*.

But the *Puranas* have their own justification. They have to establish the efficacy of the very name of Rama the chanting of which changed a dacoit into a saint. This could be true, but what is more important is to understand Valmiki as penance personified. The very first stanza in Valmiki's *Ramayana* depicts Valmiki as *tapaswi. Tapas* or penance was his main virtue while the celestial sage Narada had an additional advantage of a thorough grasp of all that happens anywhere in the universe by virtue of this extensive touring and intensive study. This deep study of human nature appropriately termed *swadhyaya* makes him an expert in exposition (*vagvidamvara*) and also an accomplished observer of silence (*muni pungava*). These are the qualities that attract and benefit Valmiki in identifying a man (*nara*) whose march (*ayana*) can grant grace and grandeur to humanity.

According to some, there were two or three Valmikis by the same name. Which one of them was *adikavi* Valmiki and which one was exactly the author of the present and popular version of the *Ramayana* is still not settled. But the average reader of the *Ramayana* can satisfy himself with the assumption that what he is reading is the *adikavya Ramayana* of *Adikavi* Valmiki for the simple reason that it is this work that has been a perennial source of both enlightenment and entertainment for the common man, the voice of wisdom for the learned, an ethical code for society, an excellent piece of literary composition for the writers and scholars and a light-house of knowledge in its absolute form for seekers and seers.

Regarding the time when Valmiki lived and composed his *Ramayana*, there are varied opinions. The age of Valmiki has been receiving serious attention in the hands of several scholars both Indian and foreign for the last hundred years. Dr. H. Jacobi holds that the age of Valmiki preceded the time of Lord Buddha and likes to put it prior to the eighth century B.C. W. Schlegel takes him further back upto eleventh century B.C. Contrary to this, A. Weber and G.T. Wheeler place him after Christ. The recent excavations conducted by the Archaeological Department of India in Ayodhya, Nandigram and other important places mentioned in the *Ramayana* of Valmiki reveal that these places are similar to each other and they should belong to the seventh century B.C. Lokmanya Balgangadhar Tilak and several other scholars consider Valmiki far more ancient than the Western scholars tried to establish. Sri G.S. Altekar (1895-1987), an authority on Valmiki, after a careful study of almost all the observations made by the scholars in this regard, concludes with clarity and confidence that the genuine *Ramayana* of Valmiki cannot be later in age than the beginning of the first millennium B.C.

Whatever be the time to which Valmiki belonged, the reality is that he has transgressed all limits of time through his epic, the *Ramayana*. The very fact that Asvaghosha, the author of the *Buddhacharita* who flourished in the first century

B.C. makes a commendatory reference to the first poetic expression of Valmiki as follows:

वाल्मीकिरादौ च ससर्ज पद्यं जग्रंथ यन्न च्यवनो महर्षि:

This shows that not only Valmiki preceded the Christian era but his first verse *ma-nishada* gained universal popularity among the later poets and also that several other sages had a similar experience, but could not translate their experience into an epic expression as Valmiki did. He was perhaps chosen for this historical event and his vision and mission received the blessings of the creator himself who declared that the story of Rama's march in search of truth and righteousness would last as long as the mountains have the stability to stand and rivers continue to flow making the world livable and lovable.

यावत् स्थास्यन्ति गिरय: सरितश्च महीतले।
तावद्रामायण कथा लोकेषु प्रचरिष्यति।।

*Two*

# The Man of Valmiki

The man of Valmiki's vision presents a pleasant but rare blend of human idealism and potential divinity. It was, however, not the intention of the seer to depict Rama as God or an incarnation of God. His quest was basically for an ideal man, a model for modesty, an example for excellence and an embodiment of eternal truth (*satya*) and righteous conduct (*dharma*). The celestial sage Narada meticulously follows the type of man Valmiki was looking for and accordingly cites an example which exactly an exhaustively satisfies all the requirements of an ideal man with the word 'man' (*nara*) underlined.

The first and the foremost quality that Valmiki mentions in his enquiry (or query to be more precise) is *gunavan* which literally means a virtuous man, but etymologically implies a man who has the quality of multiplying himself. He should stand for many, live for many and identify himself with as many as possible.

The man contemplated and identified by the two sages was a jewel among the princes of Ikshavaku dynasty—an admirable admixture of fascinating physical form, intellectual brilliance and spiritual awareness of the potential divinity manifest in every part and particle of this universe. Invincible valour, transparent vision, mastery over all branches of knowledge both conditioned and absolute, balanced emotions, compassion and consideration for all including his opponents, readiness to accept any challenge for the

sake of general good even at the cost of personal comfort and reverence for elders are some of the virtues discovered by Narada in Rama.

This epic vision of the two sages finds a glorious expression in the very name *Ramayaṅa* which means 'the march (*ayana*) of Rama'. It is not a mere story or life-history of Rama. It is a graphic description of the march of Rama—how he moves, how he speaks, how he acts, reacts and interacts with his own kith and kin, with friends and foes, with sages and saints, with the world around and the world within including the celestial splendour both within and without. His was a march in search of human values which make even gods exclaim what a piece of art is human heart. He always takes pride in being a man and in being recognised as such. Immediately after the fire-ordeal of Sita, he confesses with all humility at his command that he considers himself an ordinary man like any other human being. This makes him a 'full' man in thought, word and deed. Valmiki presents the man of his vision for the first time in his epic as a gifted child of a noble father wholly dedicated to truth, the highest human virtue that the world can think of. It is significant to note that the epic poet introduces sage Vishwamitra in the same canto in which he describes the advent of his hero. This is to show that Rama is not born just to entertain his parents and the citizens of Ayodhya with his delightful presence and charming childhood, but basically intended to serve humanity by moving with the masses and removing their obstacles and adversities in life. Being a great seer with spiritual insight into individuals and their potentiality to serve humanity, Vishwamitra approaches Dasaratha with a request to spare his eldest son Rama just for ten nights to protect his *yajna* from the demons like Maricha and Subahu. Naturally Dasaratha does not agree to part with his son who is dearer to him than life, hardly sixteen and hence not equipped enough to meet the challenge for which

he is being commissioned by the great sage. But Vishwamitra explains to him the intrinsic worth of his son who is a potential *mahatma* (a great soul) whose strength lies in his dedication to truth (*satyaparakrama*). He tells the king to consult Vasishtha, his family-mentor who is also aware of the immense potentialities of his son deployed by gods only for this purpose. The affectionate father ultimately reconciles himself to the situation when Vasishtha tells him that Vishwamitra has come not to seek help for himself but to help him, his son and through him the entire humanity. This marks the beginning of the real march of Rama, a commissioned and committed prince of the Ikshvaku dynasty. Rama was, of course, accompanied by his brother Lakshmana who was constanly with him as he cannot breathe without Rama and Rama cannot sleep without Lakshmana.

लक्ष्मणो लक्ष्मिसंयन्नो बहि: प्राणइवापर:
न च तेन विना निद्रां लभते पुरुषोत्तम:

The two princes who have already specialised in the archery and artillery feel confident in discharging their duties and enjoy the august presence and guidance of the sage Vishwamitra, a rare combination of martial courage and metaphysical depth. Soon after they cross the city-limits of Ayodhya, Vishwamitra initiates Rama into two powerful skills (*vidyas*)—protection and fortification (*bala* and *atibala*). Then he exposes Rama to the challenging task of killing Tataka, a female demon.

Though the initial hesitation to kill a woman delays the act, Rama, once convinced about the propriety of the act, carries out the orders of the sage in no time. Pleased with the potential powers of his disciple, the sage transmits to Rama the higher skills of using powerful missiles to Rama. Thus the two princes fully equipped to protect the *yajna* spend six full nights without rest. Rama takes care to ensure that the punishment meted out to the demons is

just and balanced. He annihilates Subahu, but despatches Maricha into the far off sea and spares his life. Thus the main task entrusted to Rama is marvellously completed.

Vishwamitra wanted Rama with him just for ten nights which are over by now. But the inmates of the Siddhashrama, the her-mitage of Vishwamitra, suggest that the two princes should visit Mithila where King Janaka is performing a special *yajna* with a view to secure a competent life-companion for his daughter. A young man who seeks her hand should be able to handle the mysterious bow that belongs to Lord Shiva. This proposal extends the stay of the two princes for a further period. What is interesting to note here is that the idea of taking the two princes to Mithila is initiated by the inmates of the hermitage and not by Vishwamitra who gives a silent 'nod' to the welcome idea. What is more mysterious is that the princes passively follow what the elders say. This is an exhilerating experience for them who do not aspire for it but just take it as it comes to them. This tendency to welcome what is ordained by the divine will without any ambition or apprehension, is what Valmiki often refers to as *yadrichcha* (as it happens). The conviction that all that happens happens for the best as long as we are on the right path doing the right thing at the right time in the right way seems to be the key-note in the philosophy of life cultivated by Rama.

Though initially requisitioned for ten nights, Rama spends full 24 days with the sage a number representing the 24 syllables of *Gayatri Mantra*, incidentally it was Vishwamitra who visualised this *mantra*. Immediately after the marriage takes place on the 24th day, Vishwamitra leaves for his hillstation in the north (*Uttara Parvatam*) in the early hours of the following day.

The most significant event that occurs during Rama's sojourn with Vishwamitra is the episode of Ahalya which immediately precedes the union of Rama and Sita. The

significance of this event is evident from the fact that Shatananda, the family priest of Janaka and the son of Ahalya enquires about it on meeting Vishwamitra in Mithila and Vishwamitra in his short and significant reply says that what was intended to be done has been done. This shows that all this was preplanned and Vishwamitra had a well-thought out programme before him to prepare Rama for the future course of events.

According to Valmiki, Ahalya does not become a stone, the sage Gautama simply curses her to remain invisible for an indefinite period till she sees Rama. It was therefore a period of penance for her all these days—not taking any food except air and lying down on the bare ground like a heap of ash waiting and waiting for the footsteps of Rama. Finally one fine morning Rama steps in and the beauty hidden under the dust of lust regains its lost lustre and is restored to the normal and former position. All this happens at the mere sight of Rama, an embodiment of pure love. Love is where Rama is and there is no room for any base emotions and passions. Only such a personality can be the right match for the pious daughter of Janaka. That is how the episode of Ahalya was appropriated by Valmiki as a significant prelude to the union of Janaki and Dasarathi. It is a union of earth and heaven, forbearance and radiation, patience and penance and beauty and truth.

The way Valmiki describes the marriage-ritual and the cordial love that follows is very concise but comprehensive and highly significant. He successfully translates the language of their hearts into secular and saintly expression. One significant observation that Valmiki makes in this context is that Rama likes Sita most and she becomes dearest to his heart mainly because she has been chosen for him by his father.

Rama, the nobler son of a noble father emerges in his full form in the second book, the *Ayodhyakanda* of the *Ramayana*. It starts with the 're-citation' of the rare

qualities that Rama not only possessed, but professed in his day to day conduct. This repetition is just to record his popularity both at home and in the kingdom. Very soon the *nayanabhirama* (pleasant to look at) grows into *lokabhirama* (endeared to the world outside). He entertains his elders and youngsters at home, mixes up freely with the citizens, joins them in all moments of delightful celebrations, never shows any anger even when provoked, never speaks harsh words, makes friends even at first sight and makes them feel that he is their best friend, always prepared to help those in need whether approached or not and invariably victorious and invincible in all his adventures solely intended for the betterment of people and establishment of peace, good will and prosperity of the poor and the rich, all treated alike.

These qualities inspire the citizens as well as the chiefs who in their heart of hearts cherish that Rama should soon take charge of the kingdom. There cannot be a happier thing for Dasaratha than finding his eldest and the noblest son as his successor. When he proposes this to his chiefs, they heartily welcome the idea and the date for the coronation is fixed at once. The idea came on the birth day and the birth star of Rama and the following day was fixed for coronation.

It is now interesting to see how Rama reacts to this. In his characteristic way he does not feel excited at the proposal when his father puts it to him; but out of respect and reverence to his father, he touches his feet and accepts the proposal as duty coupled with love. While conveying the news to his mother, he maintains the same stand and tells her in a humble tone that father has entrusted to him the responsibility of looking after the people (*praja palana karmani*). As far as the pride of position is concerned, he is blissfully unconcerned and if at all it matters, it is for the pleasure of his mother, brothers and wife that he welcomes it. Next morning when the situation takes an entirely

different turn and he is asked to leave for the forests instead of ascending the throne, he feels undisturbed and accepts the word of his stepmother as good as his father's command. The sudden change of events disturbs the whole family and the kingdom; but Rama responds to the call with high sense of decency, dignity and dedication to higher values of life. He tells his mother Kaikeyi that he is prepared to leave for the forests immediately and in fact he is prepared to do whatever pleases his father. Deeply distressed at the stubborn attitude of Kaikeyi, Dasaratha wants him to wait till Bharata comes back from his uncle's place but Kaikeyi feels nervous that any delay in Rama's exile may result in the total reversal of her plans.

At this stage Rama makes a startling statement to assure his stepmother that he has absolutely no interest in worldly positions and possessions and what he is looking for with great zeal is the world outside wide open for him to inhabit and the rare opportunity to live with the saints and sages in the forest and try to promote *dharma* in the real sense. He says:

नाहमर्थपरो देवि लोकमावस्तुमुत्सहे।
विद्धि मां ऋषिभिस्तुल्यं विमलं धर्ममाश्रितम्।।

It appears as if he is addressing these words not merely to Kaikeyi but to the whole universe. His emphasis is on the starting expression *naaham* (not me) but *lokam* (the whole world). This elevates the man of Valmiki from the level of the prince of Ayodhya to the level of the man of the masses. He belongs to the universe and the universe belongs to him. The nobility of Rama finds its glorious self expression when he tells Kaikeyi that he would have happily accepted the forest-life even at the slightest indication from her without waiting for the formal verdict from his father. Immediately Rama takes leave of his father and Kaikeyi by touching their feet and proceeds to receive the blessings of his mother. On the way he greets the citizens awaiting his coronation ceremony

with great enthusiasm without showing any indication in his face of the total reversal of the entire course of events.

Mother Kausalya and brother Lakshmana get mentally upset by the most unexpected turn of events. Lakshmana goes to the extent of openly challenging the royal verdict and pleads for a total revolt against the gross injustice done to Rama, the rightful successor to the throne. But the steadfast prince stands firm in his decision and manages to convince both that his father's helplessness has to be properly understood and the banishment should be welcomed wholeheartedly without offending anyone in the royal family. Rama takes this bold step to avoid any breach of propriety and modesty in the family and also in the Kingdom and strengthen the basic virtues of life—truth and justice. True, Kaikeyi created a crucial conflict between the two, but Rama solves the crisis in a minute by instantly preparing himself for the great sacrifice which was the call and the need of the hour.

This strong determination of the noble soul rocks the whole kingdom in no time and the entire city decides to accompany the prince. Sita and Lakshmana refuse to be convinced that they could stay back. The very thought of Rama leaving for the forests all alone is unthinkable for them. Rama had ultimately to take them with him. The great Vasishtha too declares that the whole city will join the entourage of the trinity as it is impossible to think of the nation without Rama. According to him, *rashtra*, (the nation) is where Rama is whether it is forest or city. The seers and saints walk with him upto the river Tamasa where Rama stops for the night. Sumantra's horses refuse to drive back the chariot which carried Rama upto the Ganges. The fate of the pitiable parents exceeds all limits of patience and Dasaratha's eye-sight departs with Rama and never returns. All these incidents reveal the epic vision of Valmiki who has protrayed his hero as an embodiment of all human qualities that go to make up a man whose humanity excels divinity.

The scene at Chitrakoota presents this man of Valmiki in a more elevated plane of human dignity coupled with

emotional and spiritual stability. Valmiki, as an accomplished architect of human mind, builds up the two characters Rama and Bharata—in such a way that it is difficult to assess which one of them excels the other. Both the brothers plead for justice, advocate the efficacy of truth and argue for an amicable settlement of the intricate dislocation caused by wrong placement of propriety and public interest. But they fail to agree nor do they agree to differ in clear terms. Ultimately Rama comes out with an equation where the ends of justice and truth meet in a marvellous manner. He says, 'Let us share the kingdom in such a way that both of us can act as rulers. I shall look after the vast land outside Ayodhya as the king of forests and beasts and you will ensure human welfare and promote human values as the King of Ayodhya'. Even this does not satisfy Bharata. He requests his brother to grant him the pleasure of ruling Ayodhya as his trustee till he returned home after completing the 14 years of exile. He carries with him the golden sandals blessed by the sacred feet of Rama, and places them on the throne when he returns to the capital. Thus the two brothers find out a solution to the intricate problem by agreeing to accept their respective positions without any feeling of possession. This is the achievement of the great summit held at Chitrakoota—so dexterously designed by the master mind of Valmiki.

The third phase of the march (*ayanam*) of Rama starts with an alarming encounter with Viradha—who takes the trinity by surprise by challenging the bonafide intentions of Rama looking like an ascetic but accompanied by a charming lady. Before Rama explains his position, Viradha takes Sita into his fold and asks the two princes to flee for their lives. But when he is severely attacked by them, he carries the brothers on his shoulders and starts running. When Lakshmana looks disturbed at this aggressive action of the demon, Rama smiles at the situation and consoles Lakshmana that they should be grateful to the demon for having volunteered to show the way for them in the forest totally unknown to them.

His observation that the way chosen by Viradha is the way they could follow—shows how Rama looks at things in a dispassionate way. But when Sita becomes panic striken and shouts at the demon, the two brothers stop further movement of the demon by cutting off his shoulders. Then they realise that the poor demon was originally a *gandharva* suffering from a curse and he was waiting for the two princes of Ayodhya to redeem him from the curse. This incident marks the beginning of the purposeful march of the man of mission well-planned by the divine will. Surprisingly Viradha directs before his burial takes place that Rama should meet Sarabhanga, a great sage eagerly awaiting him and equally eager to help him in his further advancement in the adventurous travel in Dandaka.

Each and every movement of Rama in the Dandaka forest seems to have been carefully pre-cast by a divine hand to promote peace in the land of penance by freeing it from the atrocities of *rakshasas*. After the Viradha incident, Rama meets the saints and sages of the land, hears their woeful tales with patience and assures them that normalcy will be restored in the area. His meeting with two divine personalities—Sarabhanga and Sutikshna—helps him in surveying the whole land for full ten years. Then he proceeds to Agastya who advises him to settle down for the time being in a place called Panchavati located on the bank of the river Godavari. By this time Rama has already cleared the whole region north of the Vindhyas of the aggressive attacks of petty demons. Now is the time to face the real crisis. The great sage Agastya foresees this and fortifies Rama with a divine bow originally designed for Vishnu by Vishwakarma and an invincible arrow called Brahmadatta. He also presents him with a sword and asks him to use all these weapons to drive away the *rakshasas* from their hideouts in Janasthana and rehabilitate the hermitages of the sages. Another siginificant advice he gives to Rama is to do whatever is needed to please Sita who has followed him to the forests discarding all the pleasures

available in the royal palace. He also assures Rama, the commissioned promoter of peace that he will surely succeed in his mission by virtue of his righteous conduct and indomitable strength. All these things clearly indicate the insight with which the sage could visualise the future and prepare the ground for its planned execution. Thus the prince of Ayodhya gradually emerges as the emissary of the divine will as he proceeds to Panchavati deriving strength and inspiration from the sage Agastya—a seer in the real sense.

The life in Panchavati starts with a pleasant weather of the golden season *Hemanta* which, according to Lakshmana, is the dearest to Rama. Jatayu, the age old friend of the Ikshvakus joins the trinity offering his protection to Sita in the absence of the two princes. The small but soul-elevating *parnashala* (garden house) built by Lakshmana facing the placid flow of the Godavari reminds the three inhabitants of their past pleasures in Ayodhya and the present state of Bharata who has chosen to lead the life of an ascetic even while discharging the duties of a ruler merely as a trustee for Rama till his return. The day starts with a dip in the Godavari followed by fascinating conversation initiated and concluded by the reverberating words of Rama which are absorbed and assimilated even by the waves of the river. The whole nature seems to be reflecting the physical, mental and spiritual union worked out by an invisible hand.

The unexpected advent of Shurpanakha one fine morning disturbs the three inhabitants who, in the words of Valmiki, looked like Shiva, Parvathi and Nandi. The lady makes her sudden entry into the hermitage with a malicious intention and decides to win over Rama or at least Lakshmana or if possible both and clear Sita from her way if necessary. This vitiates the whole scenario but creates a new situation leading to a fierce battle. Initially Rama takes a light view of the event and even tries to joke with the stranger. But when the lady tries to grab Sita and make her a dish for her breakfast, he asks

Lakshmana to teach her a lesson. In receiving this lesson, the lady loses a part of her nose and ear and she runs away shrieking and seeking support from her brother Khara who immediately starts fighting against the offender. A small beginning with 14 *rakshasas* developes into a dreadful battle with fourteen thousand of them, all killed by Rama single handed. The three chiefs—Khara (the sharp tongued), Dushana (a master of abuses), and Trisira (the split-headed) are all killed ultimately. All this happens in no time and Rama is greeted with great appreciation by Gods, a blissful smile by his brother and an all-embracing hug by his wife.

But this is no occasion for complacence. Rather, it is the beginning of a bigger challenge for Rama and a grave warning for the demons whose colony established in Janasthana under the patronage of Ravana got shattered in a minute. Shurpanakha, the daring lady becomes instrumental for this sudden change and brings her brother Ravana into picture. On hearing from his sister and another soldier Akampana who were the only survivors in the battle, Ravana plans to give a fitting reply to Rama. But he chooses a path of dubious and devious method instead of a confrontation with Rama directly. Ultimately he succeeds in his attempt to isolate Sita and keep her under his custody in the Ashoka garden, but fails to realise that in doing so he has actually invited total extinction of his kingdom, his family and himself.

The role played by Rama in this critical juncture reveals the inner layers of his personality as depicted by Valmiki. When Sita expresses her ardent wish to have the golden deer or at least its skin, Lakshmana cautions Rama that the deer is not a real one but an illusory figure created by the demons to deceive them. Though Rama too is fully aware of this, he decides to fulfil the desire of his beloved as ordained by Agastya. The word of the sage is more important for him than a word of caution by his shrewd brother Lakshmana. He welcomes the challenge posed by his enemies so that the reality may reveal itself and get rooted out in the process. He

visualises a star-deer (*tara mriga*) in the celestial sphere that brought about the emergence of the illusory deer (*maya mriga*) that has managed to allure the mind of a noble lady like Sita. While leaving the hutment, he cautions Lakshmana to be extremely vigilant as there is every reason to suspect some foul play all around. The question that baffles the mind of Lakshmana and also the readers of the *Ramayana* is why Sita should fall a victim to this momentary desire and why Rama should venture into this perilous exercise knowing fully well that the end is going to be disastrous. The answer lies in the straight forward nature of Rama and his readiness to face the worst consequences in life just to respect the elders, please his well-meaning companions and uphold the banner of truth and justice. He has strong belief in the divine will (which Valmiki calls *yadrichcha*) working behind all major events in life. This is the most trying tryst in the march of Rama and he welcomes it with courage, commitment and composure.

However, while facing the consequences, the Himalayan courage of Rama suddenly gives way to an essentially human dimension for a while and he behaves like an ordinary husband sobbing with sorrow and yelling at the mountains, rivers, birds and flowers in his anxiety to trace the whereabouts of his beloved. When he sees Jatayu with his wings stained with blood, he suspects the faithful bird of some foul play. But when he comes to know that it was this faithful soul who sacrificed his precious life to protect Sita from the cruel hands of Ravana, he performs the funeral rites for the bird with great dedication which he could not do even for his own father. During his quest for his beloved, he weeps over the shoulders of his brother and pities his own fate which has deprived him of his home, Kingdom, wife and even the benevolent bird who has given his life to save him and his prestige. This human touch in Rama's character bears upon it the impress of the creator's genius. This is the type of man that Valmiki wanted to present in his epic so that he can reside in our hearts and preside over our predicaments.

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One significant feature about the adventures of Rama in the Dandaka forest is that his enemies too became his benefactors. At the outset Viradha accelerated his motion into the forest by directing him to saintly people like Sarabhanga who were eagerly waiting to receive Rama. Towards the end of *aranyakanda*, in a similar situation *kabandha* (the torso) also directs him to proceed towards Kishkindha and solicit friendship with Sugriva who needs his help and can help him too in return. Thus the memorable march of Rama advances steadily through a well-designed passage to the desired destination with the help of friends and foes, sages and savages, demons and demi-gods and men and monkeys. Rama himself exclaims at this spectacular turn of events which converts avowed enemies into wilful well-wishers. "This is the way to your welfare" (*esha rama shivah panthah*) is the blessing Rama receives from *kabandha* as a parting gift. This is the height of humility in Rama, who is atonce human as well as divine.

*Kishkindha* depicts Rama in a more humble and human form when he seeks refuge under Sugriva. He knows fully well that Sugriva needs him more than he needs Sugriva. But his immediate concern is not to contemplate on relative superiority but to rehabilitate Sugriva deprived of his position and family life by his elder brother Vali who is incidentally a close associate of Ravana. As a seasoned statesman, Rama decides to impress upon his friend Sugriva that he is prepared to serve his cause first and then leave the rest to him. This nobility and magnanimity on the part of a great personality like Rama lends moral support to Sugriva and the whole problem of the power-politics gets solved in record time. The role of Hanuman in this episode is highly significant. As things progress he becomes closer and closer to Rama who recognises his potential divinity and divine dynamism as soon as he sees him and hears him for the first time just for a minute. He also decides how to deal with Vali without seeing him. When Vali is shot at by Rama hidden under the trees, the

righteous conduct of Rama gets immediately challenged by the victim. But Rama does not do this like a coward, he does not run away from the scene, he faces the opponent with an open mind and explains to him why he had to resort to this method. Infact he shot the arrow in such a way that Vali does not die immediately like Ravana. He is allowed sufficient time to listen to Rama and satisfy himself that no wrong has been done to him. He is also given an opportunity to talk to his wife and his son and entrust their care to Sugriva under the supervision of Rama. The radical change in the polity of *kishkindha* is peacefully brought about by the balanced judgement and planned execution of Rama. Even after Sugriva is installed in place of his elder brother, Rama gives him full four months' time to settle down emtionally before he undertakes the promised quest for Sita. All the four months he spends in the caves of the Prasravana mountain enjoying the fascinating fragrance of the season.

But when Sugriva fails to respond promptly after the expiry of the specified period, Rama sends Lakshmana to see him and remind him of the promise he has made and also hint at the dire consequences if he does not wake up from the deep slumber. In a very mild but suggestive language he tells him not to follow the path of Vali which has still some space for others including him. This single sentence sets the whole Kishkindha into motion and millions and millions of militant monkeys gather in no time in response to an emergent call from their master Sugriva who places the entire army at the disposal of his friend and requests him to issue orders. Rama tells Sugriva in an affectionate tone that the orders are to be issued by the ruler and not by his friend. This shows how minute, meticulous and modest Rama is even in the trivial matters of propriety and procedure.

In his heart of hearts Rama knows who exactly will be able to accomplish the task though millions are being sent in all the four directions. He calls Hanuman to come forward and gives him a ring with his name engraved on it so as to

serve as a mark of identification when he meets Sita wherever she is. This shows the immense confidence Rama had in Hanuman. The way he conveys his blessings to Hanuman (the gem of all the monkeys) saying that he totally banks upon him for his future success as his physical, mental and spiritual strength is unlimited speaks volumes about the magnanimity of Rama, the *Mahatma* in every sense of the term.

After the moneky-forces depart in different directions in search of Sita, Rama and Lakshmana patiently wait for their return. But in *sundarakanda*, Rama figures on almost all occasions albeit as an all pervading presence, in the thoughts and actions of other characters. He is the force behind all movements in Lanka: but his voice is not heard. He provides inspiration to Hanuman, his name becomes the heart-beat of Sita, his thought poses a constant threat to Ravana day and night and even Trijata, an aged woman deputed as guard in the Ashoka Vana dreams of Rama in the early hours of the day and tells her fellow-guards that her dream will certainly come true and Rama will kill Ravana and take back Sita to Ayodhya, handing over Lanka to Vibhishana. Hanuman narrates all these incidents to Rama on his return. Rama embraces Hanuman with deep sense of gratitude and tells him with all humility at his command that this embrace is all that he possesses at the moment. Tears roll in the eyes of Rama when he sees the crest-jewel (*chudamani*) sent by Sita through Hanuman as a token of her anxiety to be united with him at the earliest.

In spite of his human touch and tender heart, Rama is basically a man of action—dynamic and determined in his movements. He collects all information from Hanuman about the strategic secrets of Lanka and its ruler and wastes no time in mobilising the force for the war against Ravana. The two brothers look at the sky while proceeding towards the ocean and feel confident that the wind is in their favour as truth and justice are on their side. But the greatness of Rama lies in his

hesitation to destroy the innocent inhabitants of Lanka for the mistake committed by their ruler. However, he reconciles himself that all this has become necessary in the larger interests of uphoiding faith in human character and dignity. He convinces himself that his main objective is not to regain his wife, but to demonstrate to the world that truth will triumph and treason will crumble. So he decides to fight the battle—not for personal benefit, but for the universal good. He maintains this stand through the battle and even after the battle is won.

The first unsurmountable problem Rama faces in his march towards this campaign for truth, justice and peace is to cross the ocean with his force. He starts with an appeal to the wild waters. But when it does not work, he threatens the waters and finds a way out and undertakes to construct a spectacular bridge across the ocean. This is done with the help of his own army-chief Nala who has some supernatural power. The strong will found a way for its fulfilment.

Another welcoming factor which contributes to the success of Rama's campaign is the defection of Vibhishana from Ravana's side to Rama's camp. All the monkey-chiefs except Hanuman advise Rama not to entertain Vibhishana as his intentions may not be bonafide, but without openly opposing them or plainly supporting Hanuman, Rama as a dexterous diplomat expresses his unprejudiced and well considered opinion that any living being who approaches him for shelter with a sense of belonging will be entitled to full protection, justice and protection. He goes even a step forward and says that even Ravana will be most welcome if he chooses to seek refuge. Saying is doing for Rama. He immediately asks Lakshmana to crown Vibhishana as the prospective king of Lanka. The quality that qualifies Vibhishana to this honour is his devotion to *dharma*, righteousness. He is *dharmatma* and so he deserves the *aiswarya* (position) that is granted to him by no less a person than Rama who himself is an embodiment of *dharma*.

The sophisticated sportsmanship with which Rama fights

the battle is evidenced even in his first encounter with Ravana. The first arrow of Rama shot at Ravana results in his instant breakdown and the bow involuntarily drops down from his hand. He never experienced such a shock even when he was struck down by Indra with his *vajrayudha* (thunderbolt). He is almost exhausted and reaches the point of near collapse in the battlefield when Rama tells him with a scintillating smile to go home, take rest for the night and then come back next day if he so desired. Thereafter Ravana never dared facing the battle with Rama till all the force including his dearest son Indrajit gets exhausted.

Rama takes his defeat too with the same spirit. He cautions his friend Sugriva when he jumps at Ravana at the very first sight and advises him to exercise full control over himself. He tells him that courage and control are the key words of the hour and great disaster and destruction are expected in the days to come. He sends a balanced message through Angada in a curt but courteous language. Angada communicates the message of Rama without any omission or addition asking him to surrender himself and return Janaki to her husband with respect and regard or face his total annihilation and replacement by his noble younger brother Vibhishana. Ravana in fact had no answer for this. He tries to react in his own language—the language of aggression, black-magic and backbiting. He makes his son instrumental in these crooked acts; but Rama and Lakshmana stand firm in their steadfast and straight forward march towards righteousness. When Indrajit binds them with the fatal missile of *nagapasha*, they manage to come out of it with the help of Garuda. When Lakshmana becomes unconscious and almost lifeless on being struck with the wild *shakti* used by Ravana against him, Rama does not lose heart, entrusts his care to his friends and wastes no time in teaching Ravana a fitting lesson which keeps him off the field till he is isolated. Hanuman acts like the right hand for Rama in times of such crisis. Rama admires his courage in bringing *sanjeevani* from the Himalayas

within the stipulated time to save Lakshmana. When Indrajit demonstrates the false killing of the fabricated figure of Sita, Hanuman and Rama get baffled, but Vibhishana explains to them the magic behind such actions.

The final battle,too poses a challenge to Rama who finds Ravana as invincible as any immortal deity. But with divine strength derived from within and the acquired strength of truth (*satyaparakrama*), developed by his ideals in life, Rama, the *dharma* personified, lays Ravana to rest and asks Vibhishana to perform his funeral rites without any hesitation as all Evil ends with the end of the mortal frame. The purpose of defeating the devilish spirit is complete and that is all Rama wanted to achieve in the historical battle. His was a victory of good over evil and so it was not an individual victory but a victory fought for the betterment of the whole humanity.

The fire-ordeal of Sita that followed has to be understood from this broad perspective. Here Rama is not just *Sitapati*, but he is *Jagatpati* by virtue of his universal vision and massive mission. As soon as he wins the battle, he does not rush to Lanka to see his beloved and console her. His first priority was to instal Vibhishana on the throne and only when the Kingdom regains its rightful successor, he asks Hanuman to report the event to Sita after obtaining necessary permission from Vibhishana. On hearing from Hanuman that she is eagerly waiting for the long awaited union with her husband, Rama looks at the world (*jagathim avalokayat*) and in a contemplative mood asks Vibhishana to bring Sita to a public place where all the citizens have assembled to see her. The fact that he wants to see his wife in public after a period of one full year shows that the matter has assumed global dimension in his hands and this is reflected in his looks. But in spite of all these assumptions, the harsh words in which he addresses his wife after a long separation do not find any justification and the poor lady deeply distressed chooses to surrender her body to the fire as it is no longer

required for her beloved. This peculiar behaviour of Rama which suddenly takes almost an inhuman form gets solved by divine intervention. What appears to be inhuman in the man of Valmiki's vision is actually his emergence as superman who springs surprise even on gods. The God of Fire returns Maithili to Rama testifying her purity and Rama accepts the divine decree and consoles his consort in an appeasing and apologetic tone.

A student of Valmiki cannot but recollect in this context harsher words spoken by Janaki addressing Lakshmana when she becomes impatient on hearing the voice of Rama (actually Maricha imitating Rama's voice) shouting for help. She urges Lakshmana to rush to the place of danger and save Rama. When he refuses to do so, she suspects the intentions of Lakshmana. Lakshmana unable to stand such a torture leaves Sita alone against the orders of Rama. Perhaps Rama wanted Sita to realise her mistake. Sita too must have felt in her heart of hearts that Rama, the embodiment of *dharma*, has now ensured that the ends of justice are met.

After all this is over, Rama provides a healing touch to Sita by sitting close to her in the Pushpaka Vimana narrating all that had happened in her absence in various places which are also shown to her from the aircraft. On the way when the craft overflies Kishkindha, Sita suggests that they should take Tara and Ruma also with them so that the coronation ceremony may be really colourful. Rama readily agrees but he does not seem to be in a hurry to reach Ayodhya before time. He has four more days to go to complete the stipulated period of 14 years. So he halts at Bharadwaja's *ashram* and sends Hanuman in advance to convey the news to Bharata. This allows some time for Bharata to settle down emotionally. How meticulous Rama is even about minor things is evidenced when he returns the Pushpaka aircraft to Kubera, its rightful owner as soon as he lands in Nandigram. He has thus rectified the wrong done to Kubera. Ravana had grabbed this from Kubera earlier.

Sita's banishment is another event which gives rise to

sharp criticism against Rama. But again one has to understand the propriety behind all actions of Rama from a broader angle. Though basically human, this superman at times transcends all levels of human conscience, when it is a question of upholding basic human values like truth, justice, righteousness, prestige, dignity, decency and decorum. Very few people can understand this language and Sita has cultivated this language mostly from her life-companion Rama and later under the paternal care and guidance of Valmiki. He makes his hero and heroine converse in this code language which is the core language of his epic, the *Ramayana*. This is the language of heart which hearts alone can cultivate. Valmiki hints at this art of speaking through hearts towards the end of *Balakanda*.

अन्तर्गतमपिव्यक्तं आख्याति हृदयं हृदा

Their feeling of love for one another though latent becomes manifest when their hearts choose to speak.

The meticulous care with which the epic poet has portrayed the man of his vision has made the epic personality and the epic both immortal not merely in the secular sense of the term but in the spiritual sense as well. That is why Rama whose strength is truth and whose stand is the right conduct has made the hearts of all well-meaning persons in this phenomenal world his permanent abode for all time to come as long as rivers flow and mountains stand.

*Three*

# The Paragon Par Excellence

The vision and the voice of Valmiki are seen at their best while portraying the character of Sita as an ideal woman—a model for modesty, a symbol of sophisticated simplicity, an embodiment of grace and grandeur, a strict observer of ethical code of conduct, an exceptional example of supreme love and a rare combination of courage and compassion. These qualities make her a perfect match for the celebrated personality of Rama whom she even excels at times.

She was first introduced to the epic poet Valmiki by the celestial sage Narada as a lady gifted with all the good qualities of a woman which place her foremost among the fair sex in the world and hence endeared to Rama as an integral part of his life-breath. Valmiki presents her towards the end of the *Balakanda* when she joins Rama as her life-companion as the personification of mystic syllable *Sri*. Narada too describes her as a creation of divine mystery as it is impossible to believe that such a human being can exist in this phenomenal world. Her greatest asset in life was her silent suffering and she never aspired for any reward or recognition for the sacrifice she has made for the betterment of her family and the society at large.

She never hated anyone but only pitied and pardoned those who had an evil eye on her, never harmed even those who tried to harm and harass her. She was always strong in her determination to do the right thing unmindful of the wrong done to her and made no compromise with comfort or

convenience at the cost of righteousness. Her life was full of odd and adversities leading to soul-stirring ordeals which she alone could face and surpass. She was admired by all either openly or in their heart of hearts. Even Shurpanakha had great admiration for her charming beauty and reports to her brother Ravana her captivating complexion as a rare phenomenon in the three worlds. Ravana too addresses her as *sarvoloka-manohari* and has great regard for her unshakable faith and dedication to her husband. Mandodari who considers herself superior to Sita in birth, beauty and benevolence praises her as a replica of both *Bhoodevi* and *Sridevi* and ranks her as superior to *Rohini* and *Arundhati* in charm and chastity. But it is an irony of fate that such a paragon of beauty, chastity and integrity should suffer throughout her life and seek shelter in the interior layers of the Mother Earth. But this is the hard reality underlined in the fascinating and pathetic story of the *Ramayana*, the coordinated march of Rama and Sita who have remained immortal images for all that is good. Sumantra has rightly said consoling the King Dasaratha and his queen Kausalya that the woeful tales of Rama and Sita are not to be lamented but will be applauded for casting their lasting impression on humanity and human dignity for all ages to come.

Valmiki, unlike his successors in the *Ramayana* tradition, celebrates Sita's marriage with Rama along with other three marriages arranged on the same dais same day and same time in a very simple way but most systematically and strictly in accordance with the Vedic verdicts. The whole celebration is described in a single canto covering 40 *slokas* in all, the actual ritual occupying only half the canto. The epic poet does not give any occasion to his readers to hear the couple talking to each other or others talking among themselves about them. He however describes their union of hearts and their heart to heart talk which their hearts alone can understand.

*Sri Swaroopini* (Sri incarnate) Sita is seen speaking for the first time in the epic while greeting Rama on the day of his

proposed coronation ceremony when he is summoned by his father and Kaikeyi through Sumantra. The setting in the royal palace from where these summons have come can easily be guessed by any one with average sense of understanding and Rama readily rising to the occasion spells it out in a highly suggestive language. Sita catches the hint immediately and wishes her husband all the best invoking the blessings of all the deities she can think of for his all round safety and security. She proceeds with her husband upto the outergate to see him off. This is the first occasion for the readers of Valmiki to hear the soft, sophisticated, suggestive and balanced expression of Janaki who was rightly acclaimed later by Anaşuya as sweet tongued (*madhura bhashini*), by Rama as a lady with an auspicious voice (*kalyanatara vadini*) and by Hanuman as one with an elevating tone (*adeenabhashini*).

A few hours later on the same day she is again seen talking to Rama altogether in a different situation. The coronation suddenly takes the form of exile. Rama was to leave for the forests the same evening. He has already taken his mother's permission and blessings for the same. But he finds it hard to put it to Sita. He approaches her with a depressed mind and obvious discomfiture. Sita being shrewd and intelligent by nature, reads his mind from his looks and exclaims in an inexplicable anxiety, "What happened to you, my Lord!" When Rama with lot of hesitation reveals the shocking news to her and advises her to stay at home and serve his parents for fourteen years while he will stay in the forests to carry out the orders of his father, Sita comes out in her true form accepting the challenge more readily than her husband and insisting that she should also accompany him to the forests to look after him and to clear his way from all obstacles including thorns and grass. When Rama persists in his reluctance to take her with him for several reasons and describes to her in detail the hardship she will face in forest life, Sita smiles at his underestimation of her courage and conviction and tells him to his face that this is not becoming

of a valiant prince of Ayodhya and that her father Janaka never knew that his son-in-law was masculine only in form and not in drive and dynamism. This silences Rama who ultimately agrees to take her to the forest. Thus she asserts her right to accompany her husband though she was not covered under the wishes of Kaikeyi. But throughout the delicate conversation with Rama, she maintains marvellous balance of emotions, law of modesty and high sense of propriety without any prejudice to the royal dignity. Rama too appreciates her uprightness which was obviously a result of her upbringing at home and he really feels proud of having such a noble lady as his life companion. When Rama describes at length the dangers and risks involved in the forest life among the wild animals, Sita makes a matchless observation saying, "Where is fear when the source and solution of all fears is near." Rama finds, to his pleasant surprise that even her tears which she uses as the ultimate weapon to convince her husband are fearless and pierce themselves into his heart which melts into majestic magnanimity.

When Kaikeyi insists on Sita wearing the bark-garments along with Rama, Vasishtha intervenes and scolds Kaikeyi for exceeding the limits of propriety and tells the public that Sita will rule the land as her husband's rightful representative during his exile. Sita looks innocent on seeing the garments and also on hearing the words of Vasishtha with full of feeling. She wears the garments and leaves for the forests with her husband though she accepts with deep gratitude the garments and ornaments given by Dasaratha as his parting token of blessings. She responds to the advice tendered by the queen Kausalya to treat Rama with respect during his exile saying that she has the necessary background to conduct herself as a loyal life-companion of a noble husband like Rama. She puts it in such a polite and polished language that tears roll in the eyes not only of Kausalya but all those present there.

While crossing the river Ganga, she offers her prayers—*sitanjali* to use the words of Valmiki—to the sacred river

asking for her blessings for the successful completion of the stipulated period of forest life so that her husband may fulfil the desires of his father and mother.

The sage Bharadwaja showers his affectionate blessings on Sita and asks the two princes to fulfil all her desires as she has chosen to undertake the forest life for the sake of her husband. The sage Agastya also praises the spirit of sacrifice she has exhibited in serving her husband in times of distress unmindful of the danger involved in the path she has chosen. She receives the blessings of the pious lady Anasuya so profusely that even Rama feels jealous of her. Valmiki equates Sita with Anasuya in this context by using the same name for both. Anasuya speaks to Anasuya (in the words of Valmiki). The distinction implied is perhaps that one is Anasuya and the other one is *Anasuya*—in the making. Anasuya takes special pleasure in hearing the details of Sita's marriage in her own words. The short sketch of her marriage narrated by Sita pleases the ears and the heart of Anasuya so much that she finds the eventful moments reflected in the external nature. The ascetic couple—Atri and Anasuya—thus lead the young ascetics to the Dandaka forest with their sweet words and sweeter feelings.

The forest life, as anticipated, poses many challenges to the 'trinity' (Sita, Rama and Lakshmana) and Sita never loses her balance even in the most adverse circumstance. The first encounter was with Viradha who tries to grab Sita and run away. When he is attacked by the two princes he drops Sita down and lifts the two princes on his shoulders and starts running away. At this critical juncture, Sita is not worried about herself. She requests the demon to leave the princes and take her instead. It requires immense courage and confidence for a young woman to say "Take me and leave the two princes, I bow to you, the great *rakshasa*". (*mam harotsrija kakutshau namaste rakshasottama*). The patience and presence of mind displayed by Janaki in this first episode in the Dandaka forest prepare her for more challenging tasks ahead. She keeps a constant watch over the movements of both

Rama and the sages and savages around. In the process she had much to contribute to the purposeful march of Rama in the mysterious land inhabited by both monks and monsters.

When the sages harassed by the domiciled demons of the land approach Rama for protection, he readily agrees to do the needful to save them from the atrocities of the militant mob. To achieve this Rama plans to survey the whole Dandaka and overthrow the undesirable element and establish peace. At this juncture Sita raises a point whether it is right to wage war against those who have not actually offended them. In a very mild and modest tone, Sita challenges the decision taken by Rama in this respect and expects him to clarify the issue involved. Rama appreciates the view taken by Sita and explains to her that it is the duty of the custodians of law and justice to protect the pious souls from brutal attacks by wicked people even if they do not approach for such help. In fact Rama feels in his heart of hearts that his exile will be meaningful if he can achieve this during his stay in the forest.

Panchavati is the pivotal place for the advancement of the march of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana. Sita becomes the central figure by conspiracy of circumtances. Originally Rama was the target for the intruder Shurpanakha. Sita came into picture only by implication. Shurpanakha, no doubt, criticised the merits of Sita in comparison with herself only to win over Rama to her side. But surprisingly Rama took fancy in making fun of her and had to pay heavily for that as the passionate lady with blurred vision could not understand the sportive mood of the two princes and tried to devour Sita physically to clear the obstacle in her way. But Sita was totally silent and neutral throughout the event which eventually led to her abduction by Ravana. In fact all that happened in Panchavati was illegal, irrational and immoral. But the irony is that the innocent soul Sita had to suffer miserably for the fault of others and the irony of fate. The only mistake committed by Sita was to ask for the deer skin and then to hurry up Lakshmana and prevail upon him beyond all justification to rush towards Rama and save him from the

possible danger. But this was indeed a very serious mistake committed by her though her intentions were genuine and justified from her own angle. But Rama and Lakshmana too failed to use their discretion. It appears that the destiny had its irresistible way through all the thoughts, words, and deeds of all the three personalities who were exceptionally intelligent and balanced in their own way. The sincere efforts of Maricha to dissuade Ravana and the courageous encounter of Jatayu also went in vain and what was destined to happen did happen and the immediate victim was the innocent soul Janaki.

But Maithili could not realise her mistake till Ravana who entered into her hermit in the guise of a mendicant revealed his real form and expressed his evil intentions. Though it was too late for her to realise her mistake, she faced the situation with self-respect, courage and courtesy. She believed what she saw and treated Ravana as a mendicant and an ascetic which he looked. She offered him fruits and water and asked him to wait till her husband returned. She even narrated her story to him with all minute details having faith in his bonafide nature. But the moment his intentions were revealed, she did not spare him. She condemned his action without any fear and threatened him against the danger to his very life if he courted enmity with her husband whom he cannot escape wherever he may go. She plainly refused to accept him as desired by him and enumerated the extraordinary qualities and capabilities of her husband. When she was actually in the hands of Ravana, she shouted for help. But when she found herself helpless, she suddenly found Jatayu who had volunteered to guard her against any possible danger. She appreciated the great courage and spirit of sacrifice displayed by Jatayu but felt extremely sorry that he had to lose his life. She only prayed that he should be alive till he reports the event to Rama. On the way, she dropped some of her ornaments on a hillock so as to serve as clues for her husband to find out her whereabouts. Ultimately she became a captive in the Ashoka-grove of Ravana. From here starts the real

*Ramayana*—Rama's *ayanam* or march in quest of his beloved—a paragon of beauty, virtue, selfless attachment and fearless detachment.

This march of truth in quest of beauty which forms the main thrust of the *Ramayana* starts with the temporary separation of beauty from truth and finds a pleasant conclusion with the visualisation of the eternal union of the two basic forces of life by a competent link which Valmiki finds in Hanuman. This march takes the two princes—Rama and Lakshmana from Panchavati to Kishkindha. It is significant to note that it was sage Agastya who directed Rama to Panchavati and it was *kabandha* who suggested to the two princes to proceed to Kishkindha and seek alliance with Sugriva who needs their help and who will be able to help them in return.

Though Sugriva was the main person for whom Rama reached Kishkindha, Hanuman plays more significant role in the task entrusted to Sugriva and ultimately he alone succeeds in locating, indentifying and consoling Sita and also in reporting back to Rama about her safety thus paving the way for the happy reunion of Rama and Sita. In the process he becomes closer to both and enjoys their appreciation, affection and blessings. Single-handed, he manages the whole task entrusted to millions of monkey-chiefs. When he sees Sita for the first time in *ashokavana* after searching for her throughout the night with meticulous care and caution in the unknown land, he feels immensely rewarded and blessed. The blissful sight of the paragon *par excellence* in all respects and a true replica of Rama, the embodiment of all virtues springs a surprise on his analytical brain which fails to understand how the two figures have so much of close resemblance. Their physical resemblance makes him believe that they should be one mentally too. When he looks at her from close quarters hidden behind the leaves of a tree, he finds that her looks are wholly focussed on the invisible but intelligible figure of her beloved Rama. He found Rama and Rama alone in her looks and so Valmiki rightly recognised her as

*ramekshani*. Her face looked like the full moon with the radiating lustre dispelling the darkness all around. She looked like faith incarnate, hope personified; but wrongly placed by the irony of fate. Hanuman tries in vain to find a fitting parallel for her beauty, majesty, modesty, piety and implicit simplicity radiating from her face in all the three worlds. He is amazed to find an equation for equanimity in her enlightening looks. His mind instantly goes to Rama and tries to convey all his feelings to him in telepathy.

When Hanuman was deeply absorbed in the assimilation of the excellence right in front of him, Ravana enters into the garden to persuade Sita, to accept him as her husband and become his principal queen. This arouses anger and curiosity in Hanuman who patiently waits to see how the noble lady reacts to this ignoble temptation. He finds Janaki dismissing the offer outright and asking Ravana to behave himself. Sita saw Ravana for the first time in the disguise of a *sadhu* (a gentle ascetic) and she expects him to prove worthy of that form. She cautions him that his attempts to motivate or molest her will result in the total destruction of the whole kingdom including his existence and he cannot stand the invincible valour of Rama in the battlefield. She tells him in categorical terms that the only way to save himself and his people is to surrender himself at the feet of Rama and return her to him with respect. Ravana pays deaf ear to all this as is expected of him and threatens Sita that if she fails to reconcile with him in two months' time she will be served as his breakfast by his cooks. Sita turns him back by turning her back towards him.

Hanuman now feels convinced that the noble lady sitting under the shade of a tree in the Ashoka-grove is verily the same for whom Rama is trying to move earth and heaven. This is the real beauty that Hanuman visualises in the devoted wife of Rama. This adds dignity to her physical beauty.

Now Hanuman ventures to appear before her and talk to her so that he may understand her from close quarters and

confirm her identity before he returns to Kishkindha and reports back to Rama. Sita has not yet seen Hanuman. So he starts narrating the story of Rama with particular reference to his recent association with the monkey-chiefs in Kishkindha so as to invite her attention towards his presence. When Sita looks up and finds a monkey uttering the sweet and sacred name of Rama, Hanuman gathers courage to come down and reveal his identity. After he succeeds in convincing her of his bonafide intentions in aproaching her, he hands over the ring given by Rama. The dialogue gradually develops into a cordial exchange of views on various topics of common interest. After establishing rapport with the noble lady, Hanuman offers to take her to Rama presently by carrying her on his shoulders and relieve her of all her troubles and turmoils in a short time. But Sita explains to him that she cannot accept this offer for several reasons, the main reason being that it would not contribute to the prestige of Rama to get back his abducted wife through the back-door. She makes it clear that Rama should fight the battle, defeat Ravana and then take her to Ayodhya with dignity. Now Hanuman feels convinced that not merely physically and mentally, but more important than the two, spiritually too this lady deserves to be the most suitable companion of a great personality like Rama. This exchange of ideas and ideologies between Janaki and Hanuman reveals the real stuff of which the lady is made. This is the real beauty hidden in the paramount apartments of her heart that Valmiki intended to unfold in the fifth book of his epic which he rightly names *sundarakanda* (The Book of Beauty).

It is often said about this part of the *Ramayana* that every character, every event, every movement, every word and every thought expressed in *sundarakanda* is beautiful. What makes it really beautiful is the multi-demensional beauty manifest in the character of Janaki, the paragon *par excellence*. It requires spontaneous flow of *atmic* (more powerful than atomic) energy within and without to discard the worldly pleasures available in plenty at the mere 'nod' and stick to the

basic principles that support and sustain the lasting values of life at all costs. This is the basic beauty which finds glorious self expression in this part of the *Ramayana*.

It does not take much time for Maithīli to understand the potential divinity in Hanuman. After talking to him for considerable time she confides in him and narrates to him certain incidents relating to her private life which are known to her and Rama alone so that these instances can convince Rama that Hanuman has actually seen her. When Hanuman asks for a token to be presented to Rama as a mark of his meeting her, she readily gives her crest-jewel. She finds herself so much at home with Hanuman that she does not like him to leave her. But at the same time she realises that the sooner he returns and reports the events to Rama, the quicker will be the march of Rama to save her from the torture she is put to. Finally she gets reconciled to the situation and parts with him for the time being.

Hanuman does not leave Lanka like a spy. He makes his presence felt by all the citizens including Ravana. He advises Ravana to return Janaki to Rama with a note of apology or be prepared for the total destruction of his kingdom and himself. When Ravana orders that Hanuman's tail be burnt and he should be paraded in the city, Hanuman takes this opportunity to burn the whole city. In the process suddenly he feels worried about the safety of Sita who too might have been burnt away. But when he hears the citizens exclaiming among themselves that Sita is safe, Hanuman realises that Sita cannot be effected by fire as she herself is as pure as fire (*na nasishyati kalyani nagniragnau pravartate*). In fact Sita too feels slightly nervous about the safety of Hanuman when she hears about the cruel punishment ordered for him and immediately prays to the God of Fire to be kind to the messenger of peace commissioned by Rama. In the words of Valmiki she assumes the role of a mouth piece for Maruti and invokes the blessings of her personal god Fire or *pavaka* (Purifier) to use Valmiki's expression in highly significant

language. Sitting face to face with fire, the broad-eyed lady (*vishalakshi*) addresses the auspicious god as follows :

यद्यस्ति पतिशुश्रूषा यद्यस्ति चरितं तपः ।
यदि वात्वेकपतीत्वं शीतोभव हनूमतः ।।

If my devotion to my husband has any value, if my conduct in all respects has really taken the form of penance meant for establishing peace and if exclusive devotion to one another between myself and the lord of my heart has any meaning, be kind and cool to Hanuman at this critical hour.

This chanting followed by three similar stanzas couched in words to ward off any evil aimed at a pious soul helped Hanuman not merely in keeping himself cool but also in setting on fire the whole city of the wicked. Hanuman realises this to his pleasant surprise and also feels that the blessings of Rama have also been with him and the blessings of his own father have also soothened the spectacular fire. His words of gratification are also as significant as the prayer offered by Sita. The voice of Valmiki finds exuberant and energetic expression in this context to make the text fit to stand the test of propriety and piety. The reader too while going through these reverberating words realises why the poet chose to call this *sundarakanda*.

Hanuman meets Sita again after this incident just to take leave of her and carry her parting words for Rama. She profusely blesses the messenger of peace who has rendered the greatest service to the couple by uniting them atleast mentally for the time being. Sita tells Hanuman that she will be able to survive for a month more and Rama should do the needful well in time to sustain her beyond that limit. When Hanuman conveys this message to Rama, the great man remarks that he for his own part is not able to contain his body even for a minute on hearing the woeful tales of his beloved in a land of lawlessness and rash living. He embraces Hanuman as a gesture of gratitude for the soulful service done by him.

Thus the episode of *sundarakanda* which takes exactly one full day—from evening to evening—concludes with a note of firm resolve to launch a march to Lanka and restore normalcy both in Lanka and Ayodhya. When the war starts, Sita, being the main target of the whole battle, faces peculiar threats, temptations and challenges planned by Ravana and executed by his son Indrajit. Vibhishana who opposes these evil designs is driven away and Kumbhakarna who offers his sincere opinion for serious consideration is lulled to sleep. The battle between truth and treachery starts with a word of warning from Rama sent through Angada. Ravana pays of deaf ear to the sound advice and starts his indirect, indecent and intimidating tactics. He presents a fictitious and fabricated figure of Rama with a lifeless face before Sita and tells her in twisted but convincing language how the great warrior has been killed along with his brother even in the first encounter. The innocent lady Sita believes this, but soon realises that all this is fabricated as the entire scene just disappears from her the moment Ravana leaves in hurry to attend to an urgent call from his army. It was in fact a call from the battlefield where Sugriva's army has already taken its position.

The second attempt made to demoralise Sita is to take her to the battlefield in the Pushpaka plane and show her Rama and Lakshmana lying unconscious—fatally hit by the *nagapasha* (serpent bond) by Indrajit. Here too Sita takes the scene to her heart and feels that she is deprived of her husband by the cruel fate. But her lady escort Trijata tells her that Rama and Lakshmana are happily alive as can be seen from their facial complexion and also because of the fact that the Pushpaka does not carry any lady who has no husband. Sita recovers from the shock after returning to her place of rest in *ashokavana*.

Indrajit, in his desperate attempt to demoralise Rama, prepares an illusory living image of Sita and kills her in the presence of Hanuman. This was the last trick played by him at the instance of his father Ravana. Hanuman too believes that the wicked fellow has really done Sita to death. On hearing from Hanuman about this Rama faints. But Vibhishana tells them that this is all fantasy.

But Ravana deeply disturbed by the fall of Indrajit rushes to *ashokavana* to kill Sita. But he gives up the idea at the instance of Suparshwa. The last battle of Rama and Ravana results in Rama's victory and Ravana's fall. When Rama sends Hanuman to convey this news to Sita, we find her in superb state of mind where she maintains marvellous mental equilibrium. On seeing Hanuman approaching her, she keeps quiet without any facial reaction, then recollects her dialogue with him about a month back, feels delighted thinking that her lord must have won the battle. Noticing her calm and composed countenance, Hanuman conveys the pleasant news in a number of words, but still Sita maintains her poised facial expression. Even when Hanuman conveys the message of Rama, she does not find adequate words to express herself. Finally when Hanuman asks her, "What are you thinking of, noble lady? Why don't you speak to me?" then in a voice choked with tears, she says, " I was overwhelmed with excessive joy and I turned speechless for a while. I am indeed thinking as to how I can reward you for this valuable help you have done to me." Hanuman feels immensely rewarded by these words of Janaki. But on seeing her still surrounded by the *rakshasis* who have been harassing her for the last one year, he suggests to her that he should be allowed to teach them a lesson by crushing them to death. The noble lady tells Hanuman that it is not proper because they have not done this on their own, but were commissioned by their master for this work and they have only done their duty. She adds that she had to suffer all this because of her cruel fate and nobody else is to be blamed for this. We find Janaki at the height of her magnanimity when she says, "Who is there in this world who has not done anything wrong?" She tells Hanuman to forget the past and forgive the innocent women. She only wants to see the radiant face of Rama at the earliest and asks Hanuman to convey this to Rama.

When the message is conveyed to Rama, he sends Vibhishana to bring Sita to the place where she can be seen by all the people along with Rama. He also wanted that she

should come properly dressed after taking refreshing bath and wearing all jewels. Though Sita expresses her desire to see Rama immediately without wasting time over the formalities, Vibhishana insists that the orders of Rama should be followed. Sita complies with the requirements of the protocol and reaches the place of meeting escorted by Vibhishana. In spite of all these unusual symptoms, Sita approaches Rama with a mixed feeling of delight, astonishment and affection. The mere sight of the Lord seen after a pretty long time makes her face shine like a full moon free from clouds. All her fatigue—both physical and mental—disappeared in a moment and she is left gazing on her husband's face with great expectations. But Lakshmana, Sugriva and Hanuman were looking distressed at the unprecedented unpleasantness that has suddenly changed the countenance of their master. Sita too looks at Rama intently eagerly awaiting to hear him.

The real ordeal starts now. Rama starts addressing Sita standing by his side with her face bent low—not as her husband but as the lord of the Universe. Without any regard for the individual status of himself, or his loyal spouse, Rama tells her in clear terms that he has won the battle not to get back his wife but mainly to wipe out the indignity done to him and assert his commitment to destroy the evil and uphold the good which has been possible with the help of Sugriva, Hanuman and Vibhishana.

These words widen the eyes of Sita and fill them with tears. She never expected such sentiments after a long separation and suffering. She experienced a deeper shock when Rama as a custodian of law went on to add that he cannot accept her back as she has lived in some other house for a long time and it is unlikely that a charming lady like her could have saved herself from the evil eyes of a passionate person like Ravana. Finally he tells her to have her way and choose any one she liked—Lakshmana or Bharata or Sugriva or Vibhishana.

Sita, the life-breath of Rama, could not believe that it was

her beloved who was talking to her. These unpalatable words upset her and she felt uprooted like a creeper struck down by an elephant. She goes on weeping for a long time and feels ashamed to hear all that has been said in the presence of a large gathering. Struck by the merciless arrows of words she shed profuse tears and shrinking into her limbs somehow gathered courage to express herself after wiping clean her face bathed in tears and tells her husband: "Why are you talking my lord! like a common man addressing me as an ordinary woman. I am not what you think I am. If you had such low opinion about me, you could have conveyed this to me through Hanuman and saved lot of exertion and I would have left this mortal frame. I am sorry to find that you are seeing only a woman in me, not your devoted wife. You have totally ignored our sacred union in marriage and your own appreciation of my chastity and integrity."

On getting no response to all this polite and plaintive utterance from Rama, Sita turns to Lakshmana and asks him to prepare a pyre for her which is the only antidote for this calamity. Lakshmana deeply distressed at this indignation looks at Rama and acts according to his facial expression. The princess of Mithila does not seek mercy even from Rama. What she asked for is justice which is denied to her. She then prepares herself to surrender her body to the fire as it is no longer required for her husband. In a significant prayer to the god of fire, she says :

यथा मे हृदयं नित्यं नापसर्पति राघवात्।
तथा लोकस्य साक्षी मां सर्वतः पातु पावकः।।

As my heart never turns away from Rama, so may the god of fire protect me on all sides.

Having appealed to the fire in three more similar stanzas she enters the fire with folded hands and fearless mind in the presence of the large gathering—both the visible and the invisible. A loud cry rises from all sides and Rama, deeply distressed as he was at heart, goes into a trance—contemplating on some mysterious will within, then all the

gods assemble and appeal to Rama to recognise the intrinsic purity of Sita who is as pure as fire. Finally the god of fire hands over Sita to Rama saying, "Here is your Sita in whom no sin can exist. I therefore command you not to be harsh towards her and accept her. Then Rama obeys the orders of fire and other gods and asserts that he subjected Sita deliberately to this purificatory ordeal so that the world can see for itself how pure the lady is and how objective her husband is.

The ordeal thus ends in peace. But Rama's harsh words and his mysterious silence when Sita enters the fire are even today viewed critically even by ardent admirers of Rama's exceptional, character. But the silence of Lakshmana in resonance to the facial expression of Rama gives a clue to Rama's mysterious stand. Perhaps Sita too feels in her heart of hearts that Rama was trying to teach her a lesson for her similar harshness towards Lakshmana when he was reluctant to leave her and rush to save Rama from Maricha, the golden deer. Whatever be the background, the fact remains that the whole thing was unfair to the fair lady. But it is also true that only a lady of that stature can stand such a strong test.

But a greater ordeal is still awaiting the patience of Janaki. This is a corollary to the previous one. The fire-ordeal in Lanka could convince those present on that occasion. But the citizens of Ayodhya and the entire Kingdom continued to doubt the chastity of Sita and this took the form of a scandal among the common people. As a King, Rama could not tolerate it and so he had to abandon Sita most reluctantly and relentlessly. Here also Sita ascends greater heights of morality. Eventhough she comes to know of the abandonment much later she does not misunderstand either Rama or Lakshmana. On the other hand she appreciates the stand taken by Rama in the larger interests of the State and the status of a ruler for whom all the subjects are equally dear though the queen Janaki has a right to be treated as the dearest. But Sita as a matching partner for Rama in life sacrifices her interests,

comforts and even the minimum necessaries of life for the sake of prestige of the two great nations—Ayodhya and Mithila. She belongs to both and they belong to her.

But in spite of all this Rama has again been unfair to his devoted wife though he was understandably helpless. He could have made his sentence slightly softer particularly when his wife is expectant carrying the prospective heirs to the throne of Ayodhya. The delivery that should take place in the royal palace under the care and guidance of experts in the field is going to be handled by nature. Thanks to nature that she found the most appropriate place and person for the purpose. Maharshi Valmiki was eagerly waiting for this opportunity. The hermitage of Valmiki becomes the last resort for the paragon of virtue, beauty and piety.

The Lord of the Universe speaks in silence through sufferings. This eternal truth manifests itself in the last days of Maithili, the model for magnanimity and majestic penance. The two sons delivered by her receive education under the sagacious guidance of Valmiki—a rare opportunity which Rama could not have afforded even as a monarch. This inspires Valmiki to compose the great epic, the *Ramayana*. The two sons and their mother staying with him under the parental care of the ashramites provide sustaining inspiration for him. The celestial sage Narada certifies that there cannot be a greater hero for his contemplated composition than Rama and the heroine is already with him. The creator deputes the muse of learning Saraswati to strengthen his vision and soften his voice. The epic is taken up by the two sons of the hero and the uncrowned successors of Ayodhya for proper setting in public recitations. The voice reaches its ultimate destination.

When the two children Lava and Kusha present the *Ramayana* composed by Valmiki in melodious voice, the whole hall of the great *ashvamedha* sacrifice which Rama was performing at that moment resounds with the victorious wishes of the sages, rulers and citizens. Rama realises to his great surprise and pleasure that the two boys are his own

sons. But again he does not accept them as such immediately. He invites Valmiki to grace his place along with Sita so that she can prove herself before the public, Valmiki readily agrees as there is nothing more sacred for Sita than her husband's command in spite of her untold suffering due to him.

The scene where Sita stands up to testify her chastity after producing two jewel-like sons to succeed Rama is bound to be spectacular. By this time Sita has cultivated a supreme vision and sophisticated outlook towards life where the spirit supersedes the body. She has now become *vaidehi* (beside the body) in the real sense of the term. With this spiritual background, she seeks shelter under the inner layers of her mother, the Earth from where she emerged to demonstrate to the blessed inhabitants of this great planet that Man and Woman are the supreme realities of life and all pleasures and pains that delight or depress them are only the manifestations of that reality—sometimes crude, sometimes rude but always refined in their real form.

Her last words addressed to the Mother Earth are as follows:

यथाहं राघवादन्यं मनसापि न चिन्तये।
तथा मे माधवी देवी विवरं दातुमर्हति।।
मनसा कर्मणा वाचा यथा रामं समर्चये।
तथा मे माधवी देवी विवरं द्रातुमर्हति।।
यथैतत् सन्यमुक्तं मे वेद्मि रामात् परं न च।
तथा मे माधवी देवी विवरं दातुमर्हति।।

If I have no other thought in my mind except that of Rama, my mother Madhavi may give me place in her. If I have been worshipping Rama and Rama alone throughout my life in thought, word and deed, my mother Madhavi should take me into her fold. If what I say is true and if Rama realises it, I should find a place in the peaceful abode of my mother Madhavi.

As desired and directed by Rama, his lasting life-partner has no doubt come forward to testify her purity and chastity

before the great assembly of sages and citizens—but merely to merge into the mother Madhavi and not to return to Ayodhya and enjoy the worldly pleasures. Incidentally she has also proved the significance of the Vedic verdict that the mortals become immortal not by mere actions, not by procreation alone and not even by material prosperity but by renunciation, sacrifice and wilful withdrawal from worldly pleasures.

Madhavi, the mother of Maithili and in fact the mother of all children on earth day and night appears before the spectactors and embraces the paragon *par excellence* and disappears in a moment.

Rama's eyes full of tears, look in vain, for the sight of his devout wife who has made him great without craving for any pleasure for herself. She spent her whole life for the huge task of **man-making** which a **woman** alone can do. Rama is great because Sita is greater. That is why the immortal epic the *Ramayana* is universally acclaimed as the magnificient story of Sita (*Seetayashcharitam mahat*).

*Four*

# The Trinity

There are three important characters in the *Ramayana* who made significant contribution to the advancement of the march of Rama from Ayodhya to Mithila, Kishkindha and Lanka. They are Vishwamitra, Lakshmana and Hanuman.

It was Vishwamitra who discovered the potential divinity in Rama and introduced it to the world outside for the betterment of humanity. Though he was once a rival for Vasishtha in spiritual growth, he managed to convince Dasaratha about the public interest in sending Rama with him mainly with the goodwill and saintly counsel of the sage Vasishtha. Though he commissioned the services of Rama just for ten nights to protect his *yajna* from the militant *rakshasas*, he extended his journey for a fortnight more and united him with Janaki. Superficially it appears that all the events that occurred on the way beginning from the killing of Tataka right upto the auspicious wedding ceremony of the four princes of Ayodhya with the matchless princesses of Mithila happened at random. But one can clearly see a divine hand in all these movements envisaged and executed by the sage Vishwamitra who was penance personified. Even the Ahalya episode was well-conceived in advance as is evident from the conversation between Satananda and Vishwamitra in Mithila. The orientation he gives to Rama about the social, cultural and spiritual background he needs to handle the tasks ahead is so well planned and programmed that Rama returns to Ayodhya well-equipped for his future adventurous life in Dandaka and Lanka.

There are two subtle points which deserve the attention of the students of Valmiki here. Firstly, though Vishwamitra wanted only Rama to accompany him for the job assigned to him, his younger brother Lakshmana also accompanied him at the instance of their father Dasaratha. Vishwamitra accepts the addition with pleasant silence. Secondly, he leaves for his abode immediately after Rama's marriage with Sita. Thus a team of three is always maintained both in the onward journey and the return journey. It was a trio—Vishwamitra, Rama and Lakshmana that reached Mithila and it was again another trio—Sita, Rama and Lakshmana that returned to Ayodhya. This 'trinity' is maintained throughout the March of Rama (which Valmiki calls *Ramayana*—the *ayanam* or march of Rama) till the final battle is won and Sita is reunited. Valmiki hints at the significance of this grouping of the **three** when he describes Vishwamitra followed by the two princes as Brahma accompanied by the twin-gods Aswini Kumaras looking like a pair of three headed serpents.

On the way to Mithila, Rama comes across three different types of women. The first one Tataka, the personification of *tamas* is destroyed, the second one Ahalya clouded by *rajas* is restored and rehabilitated and finally Sita, the embodiment of grace, grandeur and poised piety is owned and adored.

The three queens of Dasaratha also present a trinity. Valmiki designates them as *hri, sri* and *kirti*. Kausalya, the most modest of the three is compared to the mystic syllable *Hri* and Sumitra, an angel in all respects is *sri* in symbolic form. Soft and short in articulation, tender and pure at heart, selfless and considerate in action and an ardent admirer of all that is good, Sumitra is the linking force among the three queens. She places her two sons—Lakshmana and Shatrughna entirely and exclusively at the disposal of Rama and Bharata. She does not say a single word against Kaikeyi whom even sage like Vasishtha rebukes in public. She sends her son Lakshmana to the forests along with Rama and Sita with heart-spelt blessings. She says in highly significant idiom :

रामं दशरथं विद्धि मां विद्धि जनकात्मजाम्।
अयोध्यामटवीं विद्धि गच्छ तात यथा सुखम्।।

Treat Rama as your father Dasaratha, Janaki as myself and the forest as the palace in Ayodhya. Be happy wherever you go.

Her identification with Sita as her own self is what makes her a sacred symbol of all sophistication that the world can think of. That is why Valmiki depicts both Sita and Sumitra as *sri* in secular form.

The third one in this trinity—Kaikeyi is designated by Valmiki as *kirti*, (name and fame). The poet seems to be saying, in other words, "Fame, thy name is woman." It is significant to note that Valmiki does not use any Vedic symbol to denote Kaikeyi as she refuses to understand anything beyond her acquired right to enjoy life with all pomp, power and pride at her command.

A team of three forms again to welcome the forest life discarding family life and the royal comforts with a spirit of duty, dedication and detachment. The demands of Kaikeyi did not, however, stipulate in the beginning that Sita and Lakshmana should go to exile. But they wilfully volunteered to leave for the forests along with Rama to serve him and his noble cause. Rama was reluctant to take them with him as he did not want to deprive them of their comfort. But the Man of Valmiki can never be all alone. He has to have a minimum team of three and his brother Lakshmana was also a fixed factor while the variable factors differed from occasion to occasion. It was Vishwamitra in the beginning and it is now Sita. It is strange that Lakshmana has a precedence over Sita in this respect though she secures her husband's permission to accompany him to the forests before Lakshmana could manage it. Ultimately all the three start their journey—to where?

Regarding the precedence, both Sita and Lakshmana try to assert themselves though Sita claims first and gets her request sanctioned before Lakshmana raises the topic. But

Lakshmana is very shrewd. He keeps himself constantly in touch with Rama ever since he goes to see Kaikeyi and Dasaratha in response to a call from the royal palace. He is present when Rama is trying to convince his mother of the propriety in obeying the orders of his father. He is slightly upset when Rama was not prepared to accept the advice of his mother to stay back. He goes even to the extent of suggesting a revolt against the injustice done to the noblest son of a noble father. But Rama keeps the balance undisturbed and argues in favour of truth, justice, family prestige and human dignity and ultimately receives his mother's blessings. In the course of the heated argument, Rama tells Lakshmana at a particular point :

धर्ममाश्रय मा तैक्ष्ण्यं मद्बुद्धिरनुगम्यताम्

Stick to the stand of righteousness. Do not take a drastic step. Follow my line of thinking.

Lakshmana not only follows Rama's line of thinking, but deriving strength from his words, he follows him physically in accordance with his line of thinking. That is why he tells Rama when he is persuaded to stay back that he had already been permitted to follow him and therefore the matter needs no further consideration.

Both Sita and Lakshmana offer their lead in the march of Rama so as to serve him and guard him against any possible obstacles. The only difference is that Sita says in categorical terms that she will be ahead of him to clear his way from thorns and grass while Lakshmana says in all humility that he will follow the couple standing ahead with the bow in his hand. Valmiki is very careful in using the language appropriate for both. Finally when Sumantra brings the chariot for the trinity to board, Sita boards first taking with her all the necessary tools and weapons of the two princes and also the precious clothes and ornaments presented by Dasaratha in the last minute as a parting gift. After Sita takes her seat in the

chariot, the two princes also get in. This memorable event which takes the three principal characters in the *Ramayana*—Sita, Rama and Lakshmana—away from Ayodhya, is described by the epic-poet with a deep insight into the significance of each and every movement, expression and emotional background that build up an atmosphere which makes a mark in the history of mankind.

When the three members of the royal family start from Ayodhya, the whole city tries to follow them. Most of the citizens spend the first night with them on the bank of the river Tamasa. Rama somehow manages to leave behind the citizens and proceed further. After crossing the river Ganga, Sumantra also returns to Ayodhya most reluctantly. Now the trinity is left alone.

It was not just a matter of coincidence that Lakshmana accompanied Rama to the forests. He was destined to give company to Rama. His mother Sumitra says in saintly language that he was born for the forest-life (*srishtatvam vanavasaya*). Things would have no doubt been different, had Bharata been in Ayodhya on the day when the coronation ceremony was proposed. It is difficult to imagine what course the events would have taken. But as it happened, one can clearly see that Dasaratha was very keen to have the coronation celebrated before Bharata returns to Ayodhya and Kaikeyi too was equally keen that Rama should leave Ayodhya before Bharata's return. It is therefore the divine hand again which Valmiki calls, in his favourite expression, *yadrichcha*. Things that happen on their own come under this category.

Bharata repeatedly expresses his desire to welcome the forest life and spend the stipulated period in the forests on behalf of Rama. He tries his best to persuade Rama to come back to Ayodhya and accept the Kingdom. But Rama whose strength lies in his truth does not reconcile himself with the change in the circumstances and only tries to convince Bharata that father's dedication to truth is the most important

factor for consideration by all his sons. Ultimately Bharata had to return to Ayodhya satisfying himself with the sandals granted by Rama as his representatives till his return to Ayodhya.

Thus Rama, Sita and Lakshmana decide to spend the full period of fourteen years in the forests. During this period, Sita and Lakshmana were not just keeping company for Rama, but they had a significant role to play in all the major events that took place. Lakshmana was a great architect and it was he who built the hermitage in Chitrakoota and Panchavati. He used to bring fruits and water for the couple and also spend sleepless nights guarding them. Sita used to keep Rama in good humour and occasionally tender proper advice to him. Rama always appreciated the services rendered by both.

Like Rama, Lakshmana was also a man with a good sense of humour. He joined Rama in the fun they had with Shurpanakha though they had to pay heavily for it. When Rama was fighting a fierce battle with 14000 *rakshasas* of Janasthana, Lakshmana was asked to look after Sita's safety and he did it with vigilant dedication.

Lakshmana was very shrewd. He told Rama very clearly that there cannot be a golden deer on earth and it was Maricha who was trying to cheat them. He also identified the voice of Maricha who was imitating Rama to divert Lakshmana from Sita. But neither Rama nor Sita listened to Lakshmana as they were driven by fate. The greatest virtue in Lakshmana was that he was always straight-forward, fearless and sincere though slightly impulsive at times. But he never insisted that his word should be taken as the final one. He was accommodative. When Sita insisted that Lakshmana should follow her orders, he did it most reluctantly leaving the result to destiny. He did not like Rama to accept the unspelt orders of his father. But when Rama took a decision, he supported him and followed him to the forests. He suspected Bharata also in his intentions when he saw massive army behind him. But when Rama told him that

Bharata could not be what he thought him to be, he immediately cooled down and came down from the tree. Whenever he was restless, it was because of his top-priority for his brother. In fact in the whole epic, it is Lakshmana alone who kept himself in close and constant touch with Rama right from the birth until the last moments of life. That is why Valmiki designates him as promoter of peace and prosperity (*lakshmi vardhanah*).

After Sita was kidnapped by Ravana, the only person who consoled Rama and gave him physical, mental, moral, and spiritual support was Lakshmana. When Rama loses temper and tries to destroy the innocent mountains, indifferent rivers and irresponsible vegetation on getting no reply from them regarding the whereabouts of Sita, Lakshmana consoles him and assures him that Sita would be located, and it is not fair to destroy the whole creation for the fault committed by one. That is why Rama considers him as his 'principal friend' (*pradhana mitram*). In fact Lakshmana tries to fill the vacuum created in the heart of Rama due to Sita's sudden disappearance. The advent of Hanuman fills this gap more meaningfully and Lakshmana too finds some relief. Though Sugriva enters the scene as a symbolic friend of Rama; the real work is done by Hanuman.

Thus the third phase of the march of Rama starts from Kishkindha with Hanuman and Lakshmana as his partners in the trinity. The river Pampa serves as a link between Dandaka and Kishkindha and reminds Rama again and again of the sweeter expression of his sweet heart. He says to Lakshmana in a highly sensitive and emotional tone that every ripple in the river and every pebble on her shore speak for Sita whose auspicious articulation makes his memory ever green. After crossing the river Pampa, the two princes find Hanuman approaching them in the form of a mendicant with folded hands and searching eyes. When he introduces himself as a messenger of Sugriva, the dethroned king of Kishkindha presently waiting for them on the Rishyamooka mountain and expresses his great admiration for the majestic

manifestation of divinity fragrant in their faces, Rama exclaims with equal appreciation for the symbol of humility, wisdom, elegance and enchanting excellence in expression of heart, mind and soul that Sugriva is really blessed to have such a person as his trusted advisor (*vitta sachiva*). This is the first appearance of Hanuman in the Ramayana and at the very first sight Rama recognises the resplendent radiation in his face and the reverberating voice which expresses itself.

But in spite of his genuine appreciation for the intrinsic worth of Hanuman, Rama does not speak to him direct for a long time. He directs Lakshmana to respond. The dialogue equally balanced and sophisticated on both sides results in the meeting of Rama with Sugriva on the Rishyamooka mountain which stands for 'sagacious silence' as its name indicates. Hanuman feels blessed that the two princes have accepted his offer to sit on his shoulders for transportation to the mountain Rishyamooka. Thus service gains precedence over the sermon. Ultimately Hanuman succeeds in bringing his master Sugriva close to the divine grace of Rama and then sits quietly as a silent observer talking to Lakshmana. When Sugriva extends his hand to Rama as an offer of friendship, Rama not only accepts it but embraces Sugriva and assures him of mutual good will and cooperation. Hanuman duly solemnizes their friendship in the presence of a fire.

This solemn ceremony takes place in the Malaya mountain slightly away from the Rishyamooka. Now the interaction is between Rama and Sugriva direct while Hanuman intervenes only when called for. Otherwise he is just a catalytic agent counselling, convening and consoling as the occasion demands. Even when Sugriva proceeds to fight the battle with his brother with the invisible support of Rama, Hanuman follows Sugriva and Rama as a silent spectator. He was present on both the occasions, but he is there because he has to be there.

Hanuman intervenes only when Tara sticks to her decision to follow her husband to the other world. He explains to her in so many words that one cannot challenge the verdict of

time and she should console herself that her son who will certainly succeed his father as a prospective ruler will compensate the loss of her husband. Tara, however, does not reconcile to the situation till Rama himself assures her of continued comfort even in the new set up. Rama hints at this in a highly suggestive language and Hanuman catches it with a receptive mind. He never comments on the propriety of either killing of Vali or the restoration of Tara to her former status. But he takes it for the decree of a divine will executed by Rama, the embodiment of *dharma*. This helps Hanuman in a deeper understanding of the way Rama acts and reacts to the most intricate problems of life.

But Hanuman is always objective in his approach and balanced in his usage of words. After the cremation is over, Sugriva accompanied by the monkey-chiefs stands awaiting the orders of Rama. Then Hanuman alone had the courage to approach Rama and request him to proceed to Kishkindha and rehabilitate the great Kingdom by installing the proper person on the throne. He never mentions the name of Sugriva, but merely urges Rama to reinstate the Kingdom with a master (*swami sambandham* is the actual word used by Hanuman). He leaves the decision to Rama most appropriately. Rama, addressing Hanuman direct, for the first time answers his first point first—namely his entering the city of Kishkindha. He tells him in a very polite language that he cannot enter any village or town as he was ordered to stay in forests for 14 years by his father. Having said this to Hanuman, Rama turns towards Sugriva and asks him to ascend the throne of Kishkindha and also install Angada, the eldest son of his elder brother equal to him in strength, wisdom and character as *yuvaraja*, the Prince Regent. This pleases all the citizens and chiefs of Kishkindha and Hanuman feels fully convinced of the balanced and just decrees of Rama, the Man the Divine.

Hanuman does not hesitate to caution Sugriva when occasion demands. Even after the advent of autumn, Sugriva does not realise that it is time for him to start the promised

search for Sita. Hanuman reminds him about this well in time and ensures that he instructs Nila to collect all the monkey-chiefs from various quarters to start the search in right earnest. If Hanuman had not taken this step at the proper time, Sugriva would not have woken up from slumber and he would have lost his face when Lakshmana charged him with gross neglect of duties. Thus the timely intervention by Hanuman shows his diplomatic wisdom and safeguards the prestige of his master Sugriva.

In spite of this timely warning, Sugriva does not take it very seriously. When Angada announces the arrival of Lakshmana with angry looks and disturbed temperament, Sugriva looks foolishly dismayed and tries to throw the blame on others who out of jealousy must have carried wrong tales to Rama. At this awkward juncture, Hanuman resubmits his previous observation that his master Sugriva has obviously lost all sense of time and this has resulted in Lakshmana's arrival. This time Hanuman uses very bitter language to convey the seriousness of the matter to Sugriva and tells him that his immediate duty is to pacify Lakshmana by tendering a sincere apology for the unpardonable offence committed by him. He also cautions Sugriva that further delay in taking the right step might lead to serious consequences. It is significant to note the language used by Hanuman in asking Sugriva to honour his commitment (*rajan tishtha swasamaye*) which is very close to the exact wording of Rama himself (*samaye tishtha sugriva*). This shows how close Hanuman draws himself to Rama and how fearless and duty-bound he is towards his immediate master when the state-prestige is at stake. By implication, Hanuman wants his master to realise that the magnanimity of Rama in courting friendship with him should not be misunderstood and misused. Even then Sugriva sends Tara to pacify Lakshmana. Finally the crisis melts into compromise on compassionate grounds with the intervention of Tara and the lenient view taken by the kind-hearted prince Rama. But the whole setting projects Hanuman as a great thinker, skilled statesman and courageous communicator.

Rama notices this with a telescopic eye and Sugriva realizes it with belated wisdom. That is why when all the monkey-chiefs are sent in search of Sita to different directions, Hanuman is easily identified both by Sugriva and Rama as the competent person to accomplish the task. The whole canto in which Rama takes Hanuman into confidence and hands over a ring with his name inscribed on it as a token of recognition for Sita is devoted fully to glorify the rare qualities and potentialities of Hanuman. The glorification is initiated by Sugriva who must have grown wiser by now. He says in superlative terms about Hanuman that there is no match for Maruti in movement, speed, radiance and skill either on earth, or in the air or in the sky or heaven or in the waters as he has inherited all these virtues from his father, the all-pervading wind. He certifies that Hanuman alone has the rare combination of strength, wisdom, prowess, adaptability in terms of time and space and statesmanship and therefore he is bound to accomplish the task entrusted to him.

After hearing Sugriva carefully, Rama comes to the conclusion that Hanuman is the person who can deliver the goods as he is more confident in himself than what his master Sugriva confides in him. He then gives the ring and tells him that this will help him in gaining the confidence of Sita in him. This is the second time that Rama is seen speaking to Hanuman directly and this time he profusely showers his choicest blessings on him saying that his resolute mind together with his fortified and testified spirit and the sweet words spoken by Sugriva about him predict his predetermined success. In the end Rama says, "I depend upon you and your valour endowed with surpassing strength. So, go ahead, do whatever is to be done to locate the daughter of Janaka and I look for you." Overwhelmed with joy at these words and the precious ring received from Rama, Hanuman carries the ring on his head and sets forth with folded hands after touching the feet of Rama.

From this point starts the march of Hanuman in search of Sita. This is the greatest challenge before him and he accepts

it with courage and confidence banking mainly on the blessings of Rama. All the other chiefs sent to east, west and north come back within the stipulated period of one month to report to Sugriva that they could not find Sita anywhere in that direction. Hanuman under the leadership of Angada and the elderly guidance of Jambavan explores the south, but no trace of Janaki could be found even after the time-limit is exceeded. On the way, they come across an ascetic lady resplendent with spiritual radiance sitting in deep meditation in a cave dense with darkness at the outer end but dazzling with light within. Hanuman enquires about her and learns that she is Swayamprabha. She offers fruits and water for the party to refresh themselves and then helps them out of the cave. Now they are face to face with the great ocean with the back drop of the Vindhyas on one side and the Prasravana on the other.

Here Hanuman faces another problem which is purely internal. Angada who is afraid of reporting back to Sugriva that Sita has not been found anywhere plans to establish another Kingdom with the support of the monkey-chiefs around him. He announces fast unto death and mobilizes support for his stand. Hanuman condemns this action outright as he rightly apprehends that Angada is trying to create a split among the forces to revolt against Sugriva. He tells Angada to his face that his attempt to estrange him and his associates like Jambavan and Nila from Sugriva and the two princes of Ayodhya will be a miserable failure and he cannot escape the wrath of Rama, Lakshmana and Sugriva if he does not behave himself. In spite of this wise counsel, Angada starts his fast unto death (*prayopavesham*).

Suddenly Sampati, the vulture king and the elder brother of Jatayu appears before the monkeys. On seeing Sampati trying to consume the band of monkeys one after another for a long time to come, the fast comes to a break abruptly and all the monkeys gather round Sampati narrating their own story and hearing Sampati telling them many things more

surprising and interesting. Ultimately Sampati, gifted as he was with a remote sense of sight, tells the monkeys that he is able to see Sita sitting in an isolated place in Lanka at a distance of one hundred *yojanas* (or 1000 miles). This gives a clue to the further advancement of the march in search of Sita. Thus the sudden advent of Sampati solves the problem created by Angada and Hanuman heaves a sigh of relief at the happy ending of the artificial crisis.

The next problem before the party is how to cross the ocean and reach Lanka and who should or could do it. Here again Angada tries to eliminate Hanuman knowing fully well that he alone has the capacity and the drive necessary for this great task with the blessings of Rama and the good wishes of Sugriva, as a moral support. In a funny exercise Angada asks the leaders to express their capacity to leap across the ocean. The quotations range from ten *yojanas* to ninety. Gaja quotes the lowest and Jambavan the highest. In the end, Angada volunteers to cover the whole distance, but only one way. He is not sure whether he will be able to come back or not. At this Jambavan, the eldest of the lot, makes a sane submission to their leader Angada saying that he may be able to cover the whole distance—both ways; but it is not proper to direct the leader on an expedition as it is his prerogative to direct others to undertake such expeditions. This silences Angada. But it is now the duty of Jambavan to break the silence of the real hero—Hanuman sitting all alone, away from the asserting soldiers, perhaps meditating on the future course of action and the magnitude of the mandate he received from his masters.

Encouraged by the inspiring words of Jambavan who prevails upon Hanuman to undertake the expedition which no one else can manage, Hanuman responds, not in words, but in silent start. He starts expanding his body growing in size and whirling his tail with joy. In no time he stands in front of the monkey-chiefs like *trivikrama* who had measured the three worlds with his three feet. He then takes stock of his potential strength and the gravity of the task ahead and feels

comfortably confident that he will be able to discharge the duty entrusted to him. Finally he takes leave of his fellow-chiefs for the time being and ranges the Mount Mahendra for take off. All the monkey-chiefs greet the gallant Hanuman with loud cheers and promise their full moral support for his success in the gigantic task and his safe return till which time they pledge that they will stand on one foot as the lives of all the monkeys hang on him.

From the moment Hanuman takes off from the Mahendra Mount till his return, the whole episode which takes one full day is centred round Hanuman. He is the subject and Sita is the object of all the activity that captivates the attention of not only the inhabitants of Lanka, but also the anxious minds of all the monkey-chiefs eagerly awaiting the outcome of the adventure at the Mahendra Mount. Shot up like a sharp arrow projected by the mighty archer Rama, Hanuman dashes off to the other shore without rest and without haste like the celestial star. On the way across the ocean, the Mount Mainaka offers rest and hospitality to Hanuman who expresses his gratitude with a touch of hand and dashes ahead without halting even for a second. He encounters Surasa, the mother of the *nagas* who was commissioned by gods to test the ability of Hanuman who enters into her belly tactfully and comes out of it in a minute without killing her or being killed by her. He faces another danger posed by a mysterious shadow ogress named Simhika and destroys her. Finally he lands in Lanka before sun-set to the great admiration of invisible gods and visible creatures and creepers in Lanka. He is interrogated by the guardian-ogress presiding over the city; but he overpowers her with gentle blow and she predicts the imminent destruction of Lanka.

Hanuman enters Lanka after the night fall but very soon the full-moon (*poorna chandra*) makes the way clearly visible for the messenger of Ramachandra. Every moment he spends in Lanka from now on becomes meaningful and challenging for him as he has to see Janaki without being seen by anybody and he finds Lanka terribly guarded from all sides by trained

guardians. He reduces his physical form to the size of a cat and takes a quick survey of the city. Very soon he finds his way its the royal gynaeceum. He sees Ravana, finds Mandodari sleeping on a bed slightly away from his, takes her for Sita at the first sight, realizes his mistake in no time and then searches for the pious lady of his vision, gets disappointed not to find her, starts his search afresh, exhausts all possible places, feels guilty for seeing the ladies exposed in obscene forms, but soon reconciles to the situation which is beyond his control as he has to search for a woman among women only and so the night moves on and on till Hanuman reaches the Ashoka-grove just before dawn. He finds, to his great delight and also distress, Sita sitting under a tree surrounded by the lady-guards posted by Ravana. He feels blessed that he is able to locate ultimately the most cherished object of his search and the most precious and pious specimen of beauty in the whole world closely resembling the charming personality of Rama. He congratulates himself for having been able to see the lady whose sight leaves nothing else to be seen in the world. His mind immediately goes to Rama. He feels convinced that Rama is fully justified in waging such a great war for her sake.

The real test for Hanuman commences now. It is not enough if he has located her. He has to introduce himself to her as a genuine messenger from Rama, hand over the ring given by Rama to make her trust him, talk to her about her position and then report back to Rama all about this. So far he has been hiding himself. Now he has to come out with courage and face the consequences and also exploit them for the benefit and advantage of his masters and to the disadvantage of the aggressor. He must be planning all this while contemplating at the same time on the cruel fate which has brought the noble lady to this state for no fault of hers.

Suddenly Ravana enters as a part of his daily routine to see how far her attendants have succeeded in motivating her towards him. This gives an opportunity for Hanuman to study the mental set up of both Rama and Sita from close

quarters. After Ravana leaves the place disspirited, Hanuman starts glorifying the great virtues of Rama incidentally introducing himself as his messenger. Now Sita looks up to find a monkey uttering these sweet words. Hanuman comes down. The conversation starts. After the initial misgivings are cleared, Janaki and Maruti gather mutual confidence and trust and then follows a cordial exchange of ideas.

The sight of the ring with her husband's name carved on it pleases the heart of Sita. On seeing her anxiety to rejoin Rama at the earliest, Hanuman offers to take her on his back to Rama presently. But when Janaki expresses her inability to agree to this proposal on grounds of propriety and dignity to Rama, Hanuman feels convinced that only a developed soul like Sita can say this. He, however, manages to get her *choodamani* (crest jewel) as a mark of evidence to convince Rama that Sita has actually been seen.

Hanuman could have easily left Lanka after this incident. He has in fact taken leave of Sita for the time being having received her blessings too. But as a dignified diplomat and seasoned statesman, he wanted to see the head of the State before leaving the land which belonged to him. For this he destroys the beautiful garden and kills many *rakshasas* who attacked him. He voluntarily but tactfully surrenders to Indrajit so that he can see Ravana. There he reveals his identity to Ravana and tells him fearlessly that he has come from Rama to see Sita and that Rama will shortly be coming to Lanka and free Sita after destroying Lanka if he does not return Sita forthwith with respect. This enrages Ravana who orders him to be killed. But Vibhishana intervenes and reduces the punishment to setting his tail on fire after dipping it in oil. This suits Hanuman's plan marvellously. He sets the whole city ablaze and the huge mansions get reduced to ashes in a moment. Thanks to the blessings of Sita, Rama and the Wind God, the devastating fire does not harm Hanuman and instead serves like a sandal paste for his burning tail. Incidentally this provides an opportunity for Hanuman to destroy the strategic points in Lanka making the task easier

for his friends when the battle starts. He cools down his tail in the ocean, comes back to Sita, receives her blessings once again and returns to Mahendra to convey the pleasant news that Sita has been seen.

This adventure of Anjaneya, unique as it is in several respects, has a great significance in the celebrated story of the *Ramayana*. Ravana has been under the false impression that he has managed to abduct Sita and keep her in a place which is inaccessible even to gods and Rama, a simple pedestrian, cannot even think of reaching this place and Sita will surrender to him sooner or later. But all of a sudden, one fatal noon has caused this rude shock which rocks not only the stubborn heart of Ravana but the entire city. It was a public insult to him and a sophisticated warning to open his eyes to the glaring reality as clear as the blaze that Hanuman has produced from his tail using the material provided by Ravana's own people. This incident poses a serious threat to Lanka and a sigh of relief for Sita. Hanuman declares in Lanka that he is only a humble servant of the invincible and truthful Rama who has sent him for a preliminary survey and the army of Sugriva has millions of monkey-chiefs who excel or equal him in might and morale. Lankini, the presiding deity too predicts the total destruction of Lanka while breathing her last. Now Ravana starts brooding over the threat thrown at him by a sportive monkey and spends sleepless nights.

With all this adventure which no one else in Kishkindha could have accomplished, Hanuman reports back to Rama with all humility at his command. He attributes all his success to the blessings of Sita and Rama and his father, the all-pervading wind-god. In fact all the five elements cooperate with him in this great endeavour. The waters carried him to the other shore saving him from all the obstacles on the way. The fire-god kept him cool and destroyed the wicked. The wind flared up the fire. The land and the sky guarded him on both sides giving him a thrilling take-off and satisfying landing. Hanuman, as usual, exercised his meticulous care in

using the language of his resume. The first sentence he utters on his return is that Sita has been seen (*drishta sita*). This is what the whole Kishkindha has been eagerly waiting for. In two words, Hanuman conveys the essence of his expedition to Lanka which he elaborates at three different levels—first addressing his friends immediately after his arrival, then to Rama in the presence of Sugriva and Lakshmana and finally exclusively to Rama in confidence. The way Hanuman presents his experiences in Lanka at these three levels shows his extraordinary skill as a communicator. In his summing up the entire event and the resultant outcome of his mission, he tells Rama that Maithili who never looks depressed in her speech has derived peace and pleasure from his words though she is sorely afflicted with intense grief. The beauty in Hanuman's narration lies not merely in the faithful reproduction of the feelings reflected in the various events, but mainly in his use of appropriate words which speak for themselves. This is the real beauty in the fifth book (*sundarakanda*) of the *Ramayana* and for that matter the whole of *ramayana.*

Immensely pleased with Hanuman's achievements and sentiments, Rama applauds him and embraces him; telling him in a tone of majestic simplicity that this is all that he can offer him as his own at the moment.

Hanuman plays equally significant role in the final battle. When Vibhishana seeks protection of Rama, Hanuman offers the most appropriate advice to the latter—entirely different from what Sugriva and others had to say in the matter. Valmiki rightly describes Hanuman in this context as the most refined one (*samskara-sampanna*). He starts with a humble submission that he is not competent to advise Rama whom even Brihaspati, the preceptor of gods, cannot excel either in intelligence or in expression. But he politely contradicts all his predecessors and expresses an independent opinion that Vibhishana should be accepted keeping in view his bonafide intentions but leaves the final decision to Rama. This is exactly what Rama had in his mind. So delighted in his heart

of hearts at the well-considered, argued and justified advice of Hanuman, Rama accepts Vibhishana. This shows the faith Rama has in Hanuman.

In the actual battlefield as well, Hanuman takes active part. When Rama and Lakshmana are both bound by Indrajit in a noose of serpents, the monkeys get baffled, but Hanuman guards the bodies of the two princes along with his fellow monkeys. Very soon Garuda comes and liberates the scions of Raghu from the bondage. Ravana who takes for granted that the two princes are laid to rest by his valiant son Indrajit suddenly feels depressed and dispatches Dhumraksha to dispose of Rama. But Hanuman faces him and kills him in no time. Later he fights a similar battle with Akampana and sends him to other world. After the death of Kumbhakarna, Ravana desperately sends a number of *rakshasas* for a courageous encounter in which two *rakshasas*, Devantaka and Trisira meet their miserable death in the hands of Hanuman.

Hanuman plays a more significant role as a life-giver than that of a destroyer. When Indrajit projects a mysterious missile, Rama, Lakshmana, and all the monkeys become unconscious except Jambavan and Hanuman. Vibhishana too was not affected by the missile as he knew the trick. When Jambavan in semi-conscious state enquires whether Hanuman is alive, Vibhishana feels amazed at this enquiry; but Jambavan tells him that there is nothing to worry as long as Hanuman is happily alive. Then he sends him to the Himalayas for a powerful life-giving herb and Hanuman brings the whole hillock containing the herb. Inhaling the odour of the herbs, the whole army including Rama and Lakshmana regain their consciousness.

Hanuman performs this great feat again when Lakshmana becomes unconscious under the spell of a missile thrown by Ravana at him. Rama weeps over his body. Then Hanuman brings this *sanjeevani*, the life-giving herb and brings Lakshmana back to life.

Even after the battle is won, the services of Hanuman are still needed for both Rama and Sita. The happy news is conveyed by Rama to Sita only through Hanuman. It is again Hanuman who conveys a similar news to Bharata at the instance of Rama. In the coronation ceremony too, Hanuman happens to be the guest of honour as Sri Sita Mahalakshmi chooses to bestow a gift on Hanuman in recognition of his rare qualities—brilliance, stability, reputation, dexterity, competence, humility, prudence, virility, valour and intelligence.

तेजो धृतिर्यशो दाक्ष्यं सामर्थ्यं विनयो नयः।
पौरुषं विक्रमो बुद्धिर्यस्मिन्नेतानि नित्यदा।।

The gift is the necklace which Rama presented to Sita on the occasion of their happy re-union and which she passes on to Hanuman taking the approval of Rama. This is a significant gift to Hanuman from the hands of Vaidehi sitting by the side of Rama because this blissful moment is decidedly the result of the dedicated service rendered by Hanuman.

Hanuman is not only an outstanding character in the *Ramayana* but also a distinguished personality elevated to the level of deity—almost equal to Rama and Sita. In the whole of the *Ramayana*, these are the three characters who are worshipped all over the country by all devout Hindus. Wherever there is a temple for Rama, Hanuman is bound to be there with folded hands and his knees bent in reverence. There are also number of temples solely dedicated to Hanuman where he is shown in different postures.

The concept of trinity in the *Ramayana* applies as much to Sita, Rama and Anjaneya as to Sita, Rama and Lakshmana or to Rama, Lakshmana and Vishwamitra. Vishwamitra's role in the trinity-concept ends where the role of Sita starts and the role of Hanuman begins when Sita gets separated from Rama for a short period.

There are several other groups of three among the prominent characters in the *Ramayana*. For instance Ahalya, Tara and Mandodari go together. They are considered to be *mahakanyas*—the pious ladies. Ahalya gets purified by the

mere touch of Rama, Tara enjoys the blessings of Rama and Mandodari stands unique among the three in as much as she needed neither purification nor the blessings of a godly person. In spite of her husband's craze for any charming lady, she remained devoted to him, admired him, pitied him and mourned his death with melted heart. She had great admiration for Sita's chastity and strength of character and praised Rama for his steadfastness and righteousness which brought him victory over her husband. She did not find fault with him, but rather condemned the aggressive attitude of her husband Ravana. A rare specimen of dispassionate and dedicated wife, Mandodari receives a masterly treatment in the hands of Valmiki, an emperor among the epic poets.

Another instance illustrating the concept of trinity we find in Anasuya, Sabari and Swayamprabha. Anasuya, the embodiment of universal love without any trace of hatred or jealousy stands out among the three and transcends the three dimensions of the ephemeral world being rightly placed as the wife of *atri* (not three or beyond the three). Anasuya blesses Sita and Sabari receives the blessings of Rama which serve as passport for her to attain the highest plane of consciousness. Very little is known to the students of the *Ramayana* about Swayamprabha, an ascetic woman who helps Hanuman in his search for Sita. She is a class by herself and outshines all other men and women in the *Ramayana* in her spiritual splendour which Valmiki describes in a highly suggestive way. She stands by herself and is therefore not easily understood.

Bharata, Sugriva and Vibhishana also form another trinity. They represent three different levels of brotherhood. Bharata, designated by Valmiki as *bhratri vatsala* (fraternity personified), is an exception in this group of brothers. Sugriva, the aggrieved brother, seeks the help of Rama in getting back his abducted wife if necessary by killing him. It is true that he received the worst possible treatment in the hands of his brother, but the retaliation need not have been that heartless. Sugriva himself realises this when the action becomes irreversible. The awkward situation gets harmonized with the balanced treatment meted out by Rama. Vibhishana is

another type. He deserts his brother when he deserts decency and dignity. He joins the right side to save himself from the disaster hanging on Lanka due to his brother's wicked nature. But he remains loyal to his new master even at the cost of his kith and kin. He hesitates to perform the funeral rites of his brother. But Rama tells him that all enmity ends with death and so Ravana now deserves dispassionate treatment from him as also from Rama himself.

Manthara, Shurpanakha and Trijata also form another group. Their common trait is their contribution to the advancement of the march of Rama either with good intentions or out of jealousy. Manthara's motive is precipitated jealousy. She turns the fortune of the prospective ruler over night. Valmiki describes her as *papadarshini* (one who sees with a sinful eye). She is also called *sahoshita* (the attache) of Kaikeyi. She is seated in the heart of Kaikeyi and has come out in her true colours when occasion favoured such an ugly appearance. Manthara had no purpose behind her action while Shurpanakha had a definite purpose but could not realise that she did not deserve what she had desired for. But this simple mistake resulted in a big catastrophe for Lanka, but a boon to mankind in the ultimate analysis. The credit for granting clearance to the world from the atrocities of *lankeshwara* should go to her. Trijata is altogether a different character, a *rakshasi* with a difference. Even though she was by duty bound to harass Sita and motivate her towards Ravana, she undergoes a total change temperamentally after getting a dream in which she sees Rama victorious and Sita back in his arms with the total destruction of Lanka. She is however an exceptional woman in Lanka. Her narration of the dream sounds like Gayatri (a sacred *mantra* glorifying the supreme splendour of the light eternal) if carefully studied from that point of view.

Almost all the characters in the *Ramayana* are multidimensional and deserve a deeper study as they are all the creations of a creative genius who can see a pious heart in the measuring waves of a river. That is the human touch of an artist.

*Five*

# The Human Touch

The *Ramayana*, as conceived by Valmiki, is a march in search of man—a man whose humanity excels divinity by virtue of its transparent transmissibility. Rama, the central figure of this march of *ayanam* presents a rare combination of human dignity and divine spark. He kept the spark to himself and within himself and spread the fragrance of universal love, affection, compassion, resurrection and rehabilitation to the world around him. These are the basic human values and virtues more practised than preached by Rama, the man of Valmiki's vision. These qualities of the main character by their innate tendency influenced almost all the other characters in the *Ramayana*—good and bad.

Good and bad are only relative terms for a realised soul (*viditatma*) like Rama. They do not have any absolute meaning for him from a global and gracious point of view. They can be changed, transformed and reformed if the human approach is maintained with courage, commitment and compassion. The effect of this policy and the philosophy of life finds ample illustrations throughout the *Ramayana*.

The interaction between the good and the evil which is the main undercurrent of the march of Rama starts with an interesting character, Maricha and his mother Tataka. Maricha was originally of a noble origin as his mother Tataka was a *yakshi*. But both became *rakshasas* by a curse and so they turned out to be terrorists posing a threat to the sages of the area. It was to root out this danger that Vishwamitra

commissioned Rama. At the instance of Vishwamitra, Rama kills Tataka with lot of hesitation. But when it comes to Maricha, the human approach of Rama tries to save his life and teach him a lesson. He uses his discretion as to whom to destroy altogether and whom to teach a lasting lesson. Valmiki tells us that Rama, by using a mystic missile called *manavastra* (the human missile), manages to scatter the wicked *rakshasas* including Maricha, but kills Subahu and others by using different types of missiles like *agneya* (the missile presided over by the god of fire) and *vayavya* (presided over by the god of wind). His main intention was not to kill them but to bring them round as far as possible. In saving Maricha's life for the time being, Rama succeeded not only in reforming him but also in establishing 'peace in war'—an unusual strategy which Rama developed even in his first attempt and followed meticulously throughout until he destroyed Ravana out of mercy for the mankind as he visualised total destruction of the world in his survival.

This act of benevolence done to Maricha changes him altogether into a saintly person. He tells Ravana when the latter approaches him for help in the abduction of Sita that Rama is not an ordinary man, he is righteousness personified and no one can stand before him in the battlefield as he has mystic mastery over all possible weapons of offence and defence. As an ardent devotee of Rama, the totally transformed soul Maricha tells Ravana that he finds Rama and Rama alone in the whole of Dandaka forest. Nothing else is visible for him. Ultimately he had to die in the hands of Rama but he preferred it to the dying in the hands of Ravana. Here again there is a three-tier threat to the human approach adopted by Rama based on man-making and non-killing, the dual virtues voiced by Valmiki in his immortal epic. He wanted to save Tataka, Maricha and Ravana in spite of their aggressive attacks; but he was helpless when all his patience and tolerance disappointed him.

Even when Rama sees Ravana in the battlefield standing face to face before him, first he praises him for his valour,

radiance and external excellence, but then he pities him for his soul-killing weakness for wealth and women not belonging to him and ultimately decides to detach him from his life so that humanity can survive. Ravana too realises the rare radiance of a super-man in Rama though it was too late for him to correct himself. He visualises *narayana* in Rama when his entire army is reduced to ashes by his invisible missiles. The greatest tribute to Rama is paid by Mandodari, the noble wife of Ravana. Even in her outburst of emotions, Mandodari pays a glowing tribute to the upright conduct of Rama and the extraordinary chastity of Sita and finally to her mighty husband Ravana who, driven by cruel fate, has invited his own tragic end. The sentiments expressed by Mandodari in this context not only speak high of her practical wisdom and balance of mind but also reveal the good sense prevailing in Lanka though Ravana did not avail of it.

Kumbhakarna too supports what Mandodari felt about her fate-striken husband. When Ravana consulted him and Vibhishana in an emergency meeting along with his friends, Kumbhakarna openly criticized him for committing an unwise and hasty blunder in kidnapping Sita knowing fully well that Rama had destroyed a huge army in Janasthana all alone. Later when he was awakened to fight the battle with Rama, he repeated his observation; but realising that there is no use arguing with him at this advanced state, he promised to fight the battle with all his might and save his brother. As a devoted and beloved brother, he stood by Ravana and sacrificed his own life for him. Valmiki moulds the character of Kumbhakarna in such a masterly way that the readers notice in him a fine sense of courage, conviction, compassion and selfless sacrifice.

Even Shurpanakha is not void of such a high sense of dignity though she fails to catch the humour behind the sportive attitude of Rama and Lakshmana. The poor lady moves from pillar to post to catch at least one of her two targets. But when the whole thing fails miserably to her own humiliation, she presents the whole case to Ravana in a very

tactful way. She tempts her brother, knowing fully well his weakness for women, by describing the supernatural beauty of Sita. She even tells him a light lie that she tried to win her for him which resulted in her defamation. Some of the observations made by Shurpanakha about the qualities of an able administrator project her as an expert exponent of public administration. The way Valmiki presents this character—dynamic in spirit and drastic in action but innocent in intentions—shows how the sage-poet maintains a balance between the two extreme ends of human dignity and animal animosity.

Indrajit is another character whom Valmiki depicts with a dispassionate vision and creative imagination. He was an accomplished warrior with invincible valour. He defeated Indra in battle and came to be known as Indrajit. Earlier he was called Meghanada, one who roars like a cloud. He was highly devoted to his father and supported him till the end. He never criticized him but blamed Vibhishana for having condemned and deserted him. He played a prominent role in the battle on more than one occasion. It was he who, even at the outset, victimised Rama and Lakshmana with *nagastra* (the serpent noose). It was again his spectacular achievement that the whole army except Hanuman was made unconscious. The catastrophe was however diffused by Garuda on the first occasion and by Hanuman on the second occasion. He had some mystic powers by which he could create darkness around him and become invisible to the enemy while fighting. He created an imaginary figure of Sita and displayed her as if she were killed by him in the presence of Hanuman who believed it. Later when the truth comes out and Hanuman tells him that it is not just to kill a woman in war, Indrajit justifies his action by quoting his own code of conduct according to which anything can be done to demoralise the enemy. Finally, when he plans to perform a sacrifice which will grant him an invincible chariot and powerful weapons, Lakshmana, Hanuman and Vibhishana catch him unaware and drag him to the battlefield where he dies in the hands of

Lakshmana. Lakshmana alone could not have killed him without the support of Hanuman and Vibhishana. Such a valiant soldier was Indrajit whose death was a big blow for Ravana. What is most significant about Indrajit is that he never committed any sin for a selfish end. All that he did was to support his father and in this respect he rises to the level of the sons of Dasaratha though by birth he happened to be the son of a sinister father.

As in Lanka, so also in Kishkindha, there is a feeling of fraternity explicit or implicit among the characters depicted by Valmiki. Vali and Sugriva entertain a cordial feeling of brotherhood in the beginning. Due to difference in temperament, and hasty actions of Vali, they become enemies. But they are good at heart and have a close physical resemblance—so close that Rama could not distinguish one from the other on the first day of their encounter. Their mutual love and affection are evident from the dialogue between Vali and Tara just before Vali starts from his place for facing Sugriva in the battlefield. Tara dissuades Vali and advises him to treat Sugriva with love and affection. Vali agrees with Tara and promises her that he would not kill Sugriva, but will only teach him a lesson by hitting him hard. In spite of the rash behaviour of Vali, Sugriva too had a soft corner for him. When Vali is actually killed and Tara laments over his death, Sugriva gets upset, and visibly moved with the great injustice he has done to his elder brother, he decides to end his life. But Rama reconciles both with his characteristic skill in man-management. He consoles both Tara and Sugriva and convinces Vali of the unjustifiable injustice done by him to his younger brother which resulted in the tragic end of his life. While breathing his last, Vali entrusts the care of his son Angada to Sugriva and asks him to follow the advice of Tara in all respects. He even asks Sugriva to forgive him for all his faults though he was younger. As a parting gift, he asks Sugriva to take the golden chain from his neck and thus transfers all his might, majesty, grace and grandeur to him. This tender touch in the feelings of the two brothers towards

the end washes away all the sins and shortcomings that distanced them for a long time.

There are some minor characters in Valmiki like Sumantra, Guha and Jatayu who have contributed substantially to the promotion of human values at various stages in the march of Rama. Sumantra is there right from the beginning even before Rama was born. It was he who suggested to king Dasaratha to perform *yajna* with the help of a great sage Rishyasringa so that he may be blessed with a child. He quotes from the *Puranas* to support his stand and ultimately the three queens give birth to four sons. Thus Sumantra was responsible for the advent of Rama and his three brothers in the renowned dynasty of Ikshvakus. That is why Valmiki refers to him as *puranavid* and *mantrakovida* (a historian and a wordsmith in the modern sense). He drives the chariot for Rama and also serves as a communicator and at times counsellor for the royal family. He has great regard for Rama and has great expectations too from him. He was the person who took Rama to his father's chamber where the proposal for the coronation was conveyed to Rama. It was again the same Sumantra who was sent by Kaikeyi to bring Rama to her chamber where the distressed father was in a semi-conscious state. When Sumantra hesitates to obey the orders of Kaikeyi, Dasaratha gathers his spirits to spell out his desire to see the radiant face of Rama at the earliest. Even then Sumantra goes out but comes back to the King to convey the sentiments of the gentry waiting outside for the arrival of Dasaratha and the commencement of the coronation ceremony. The King gets annoyed and sends him back. The mental dilemma experienced by Sumantra and his drive from Kaikeyi's chamber to Rama's palace find a touching description in the hands of Valmiki. After Rama comes out of the chamber with the orders for exile, he, as a dutiful prince of Ayodhya, chooses to walk on the street and discards the chariot. Sumantra feels depressed and frustrated at the sudden turn of events. When Rama comes back to the King with Sita

and Lakshmana to take leave of him, he does not hesitate to express his anger and displeasure to Kaikeyi to her face and joins Vasishtha in censuring her in the presence of Dasaratha. He even declares his strong determination to follow the foot-steps of Rama wherever he goes and not to support her wicked plans and crooked actions. But Kaikeyi remains stubborn and Rama is about to leave. Fortunately he accepts the offer of his father to use the royal chariot till he reaches the outskirts of the city. Sumantra feels happy for the time being and drives the chariot with the three great souls in it.

Sumantra enjoys the company of Rama for some more time till the three cross the Ganga. He feels immensely delighted when Rama on his way calls him to his side with lot of affection and tells him how happy he was in Ayodhya under his care and escort enjoying soul-elevating outings with him. Sumantra had no words to express his blissful feelings on hearing from Rama the sweet words pouring nectar in his ears. The night he spends with Guha on the bank of the Ganga is a memorable chapter not only for Sumantra, but for any discerning reader of Valmiki. The two admirers of Rama spend the whole night with a high sense of awakening talking about the great soul Rama. Lakshmana too joins them. Sumantra, for his part, refuses to return to Ayodhya with the empty chariot. But Rama somehow convinces him and sends him back. Even then he waits for a day at Guha's place with the fond hope that Rama may choose to come back. When he starts driving, he finds the horses unwilling to go back. This is the most touching scene Sumantra narrates to Dasaratha when he goes back. The human touch which Rama imparts to his associates becomes so human here that it touches the animal-heart as well. Himself deeply moved by the sentiments expressed by Rama, Sita and Lakshmana while boarding the boat at the Ganga, Sumantra tries to convey the feelings as they are to the royal couple; but when he finds that they are so moved that they are mentally and

physically anxious to join Rama at once, then he tries to console them philosophising the whole situation. He says :

न शोच्यस्ते न चात्मा ते शोच्यो नापि जनाधिपः
इदं हि चरितं लोके प्रतिष्ठास्यति शाश्वतम्।।

There is nothing to worry about them, or about yourself or about the King. This sufference will create a history which will remain in the memory of mankind forever and ever.

Here Valmiki almost identifies himself with Sumantra while passing this verdict on the historical march of Rama. A state-charioteer to start with, Sumantra rises to the stature of a statesman, philosopher and finally a prophet deriving strength from the human touch and the spiritual radiance of Rama.

Guha is yet another mysterious character introduced by Valmiki as '*atma-sakha*' (bosom-friend) of Rama. Nishada (a tribal) by birth, he ruled the territory of Sringaverapura with a vast army of ferrymen and horsemen, serving as border-security force for Ayodhya. He welcomes Rama to his territory with great affection and offers him his own kingdom and hospitality for the night. Rama embraces him and expresses deep gratitude for his warm reception though he doesn't take anything except plain water that too brought by Lakshmana. He asks Guha to feed the horses driving his chariot as he is going to part with them also in a day or two. He makes enquiries about the peace and prosperity prevailing in the land. Guha asks Lakshmana to repose comfortably on a bed arranged for him. But Lakshmana prefers talking to him throughout the night. The next day Guha arranges a boat for Rama and all the three cross the river and the ascetic life starts for them.

Guha is seen again when Bharata passes through his region with a huge army to bring Rama back to Ayodhya. He suspects Bharata at the outset; but when convinced about his genuine intentions, he welcomes him whole heartedly and helps his army cross the river. In this context Valmiki uses a highly significant epithet for Guha who was trying to fathom deep into the heart of Bharata. With folded hands, Guha, the

*gahana-gochara* (alert and aware of all the ins and outs) probes into Bharata's mind. Valmiki repeats this expression *gahana-gochara* on several occasions perhaps to hint at the significance of this character. Having discovered to his great delight that Bharata's conscience is as clear as the sky (*akasha iva nirmalah*), Guha spends a blissful night with him telling him how great, gracious and good he found Lakshmana when the trinity spent the night at his place. He quotes Lakshmana saying that there is nothing else in this world dearer to him than Rama. Bharata tries to know more and more about Rama, Lakshmana and Sita—where they slept, what they ate and how they spent the night. Guha presents a picturesque description which touches the tender heart of Bharata. Immediately he resolves to adopt the same ascetic way of living as long as Rama lives in the forest.

Thus Guha's association with all the four princes of Ayodhya is highly remarkable. In a way he symbolizes the take off point for the march of Rama and again he welcomes him back at Bharadwaja's *ashrama* after fourteen years. If Bharata is acclaimed by him as clear as sky, Guha is as sacred as fire. The very sight of Rama inspires Guha so much that he surrenders himself and all his possessions including his Kingdom at the feet of the Lord of his heart.

The human resources mobilized by Rama, the supreme man (*purushottama*) in his forest-life are not confined to men and women, saints and savants and gods and godly men, but extend to animals and birds as well. The case of Jatayu is an instance in point. On his way to Panchavati, Rama comes across a huge vulture with mighty wings and takes him for an ogre. But when the bird introduces himself as Jatayu, a friend of his father, Rama immediately treats him with respect and regard. On hearing from him the great tradition to which he belongs and his readiness to serve as a resident guard for Sita in his absence in the wild forest frequented by beasts and ogres, Rama feels delighted and embraces him. He bends down before Jatayu who perhaps reminds him of the parental affection which he is now missing.

The occasion for the proper utilization of Jatayu's services did arise when Sita was being carried away by Ravana. In a helpless state, Sita appeals to all the animate and inanimate objects around her to convey the news of her abduction to Rama when he returns. Her cry is heard only by Jatayu who rushes to the spot and stops Ravana at least for a short spell. He fights with all his might, destroys his chariot, kills his charioteer and finally in the process sacrifices his own life. Knowing fully well that he cannot be a match for the mighty *rakshasa*, he challenges him to a duel and fights unto the last. He tries his best to save Sita from the disaster but even his life fails to save her from the mishap. But with his strong will-power he holds his breath till Rama comes to the site and enquires about Sita.

Immediately after Rama sees Jatayu, lying flat on the ground with blood-stained limbs, he comes to a hasty conclusion that the bird must have devoured Sita. But when Jatayu tells him the whole story, Rama breaks down and embraces him. He feels miserable at his own fate which has deprived him of his Kingdom, driven him to the forests, separated him from his spouse and caused the tragic end of the vulture who tried to save the pious lady. Sitting close to the vulture lying all by himself in a narrow passage, Rama enquires in a desperate mood as to how it all happened, what Sita had told him. Jatayu till his voice fails him narrates everything and consoles Rama that he will certainly be able to recover Sita as the hour which caused this catastrophe is called *vinda* which brings back the lost property to its rightful owner in the end. Gathering all the strength in his body, Jatayu mentions the name of Ravana and tells Rama as many details about him as he could till his total collapse.

Rama performs the funeral rites for Jatayu with great respect and reverence and prays for his attainment of the absolute bliss to which great souls are entitled. What Rama could not do for his father, he has done for the sacred soul Jatayu now. In the whole of the *Ramayana*, there are only two characters who sacrificed their lives for the sake of Rama and Sita. One was King Dasaratha and the other one is Jatayu

now. The sacrifice of Jatayu is even more touching from the human angle than even the sad demise of Dasaratha. Both are pathetic, but the latter one touches the most ultimate chord in the heart of Rama as it makes him recollect all the misfortunes in life facing him one after another which, as he says, can consume even fire. Rama was not present when Dasaratha breathed his last with the name Rama on his lips. But he saw Jatayu sinking slowly with the words of consolation emanating from his lips—undeluded though dying. Jatayu gave his life for Sita, while Dasaratha died of Rama's separation.

But Dasaratha's grief is more touching than Jatayu's death because Jatayu had the satisfaction that he has been able to convey the news to Rama who will recover Sita. Dasaratha literally collapses when the last ray of Rama's radiant face disppears from his vision. He tells Kausalya that his vision has gone with Rama never to return. His agony was inexplicable even for him. He is not able to identify what is truth and what is untruth because Kaikeyi has changed their definitions with her devilish plans. His is a revolt against his own helplessness and his little self which created a crisis in a family totally dedicated to the basic human values—truth (*satya*) and righteousness (*dharma*). He faces a terrible conflict between the two. He is not able to disown his own truth nor is he able to perform his *dharma* without fear. It was this internal conflict that brought about his tragic end. But the wisdom of his two noble sons—Rama and Bharata reaffirmed the faith of mankind in humanity and re-established the regenerating nature of the eternal values of life—truth, righteousness, love, compassion, dedication to duty and service before self.

One remarkable feature in the delineation of characters by Valmiki is that human dignity is seen at its best when human values are at stake. Though this looks paradoxical, this is the basis for the being and becoming of all living beings whose struggle as well as survival derive their strength from this eternal truth. This is what Valmiki wants to underline in almost all the characters he has depicted in his epic.

*Six*

# The Artistic Hand

The artistic excellence of Valmiki lies in his sincerity in experience and simplicity in expression. There is warmth in his words, balance in his emotions and natural fluency in his narration. He speaks less and makes his characters speak for themselves. He has an instinctive insight into human nature and a marvellous skill in moderating the movements and the momentous actions of his characters. Above all, he is an exponent of the calculus of speech and at times his silence becomes more eloquent and his eloquence silences the surrounding sounds. In short, the secret of his success as an epic poet of prophetic vision lies in his all-absorbing penance (*tapasya*) and unassuming perseverance (*swadhyaya*).

The story-content in the *Ramayana* is very simple, short and straight. But the way Valmiki handled it with his artistic hand and an articulating heart has made it one of the most fascinating stories of the world. There is some inherent attraction in the sequence and the symmetry of events portrayed by him with a high sense of propriety and proportion. This made the composition sweeter both in letter and in spirit (*madhuram madhuraksharam*).

The story begins with an enchanting description of Ayodhya and ends with the long-awaited coronation ceremony of Sri Rama after his happy return to Ayodhya. The first four *cantos* serve as a preamble for the main script and the entire *uttarakanda* takes the form of an appendix or post-script. There are some interpolations here and there

which can easily be identified by a discerning reader of Valmiki's poetic mind. In spite of the various versions of the *Ramayana* which emerged later based, of course, on Valmiki, the original version of this time-honoured theme has retained its relevance, reverence and rectitude. The deviations only enhanced the prestige and the propriety of the original.

There are about hundred characters in the story and each character has a characteristic trait of his own. No two characters resemble each other. Even the minute characters are handled with meticulous care. The way Valmiki presented some characters with a purpose and significance behind their delineation was not properly understood by the later exponents of the *Ramayana*. For instance, according to Valmiki, Ahalya did not remain a stone and Rama did not set his foot on her to revive her from the curse. The sage Gautama simply said that she would remain invisible to the external world till she sees Rama. The mere sight of Rama and a word of affection from him restored her to her original status. Similarly, Lakshmana did not draw any boundary line asking Sita not to cross it when he left her alone in Panchavati. This line which came to be known as *lakshmana rekha* in the later versions never existed in Valmiki; but became so popular and indelible with the passage of time that it cannot be erased now. The way how Ravana carried away Sita holding her in his arms and catching her by her hair to overpower her could not be accepted by the later poets who developed their own versions. The harsh words uttered by Rama just before the fire-ordeal were also not translated by several authors of *Ramayana* as they found them too bitter to digest. Finally, how Rama ultimately managed to kill Ravana has various versions not found in Valmiki. In spite of all this, Valmiki stands supreme in designing, depicting and deliberating the great story of the *Ramayana*. One has to read Valmiki in original to appreciate the real significance of this monumental epic from various angles—literary, cultural, social and spiritual.

Story-telling is an art which Valmiki illustrates through two sages—Vishwamitra and Satananda. Vishwamitra narrates number of stories to Rama and Lakshmana on their way to his *ashrama* and Satananda, the *kulaguru* of King Janaka narrates the story of Vishwamitra to the two princes when they reach Mithila. The way the two sages narrate the stories makes the princes forget about all except the thrill that fills their hearts. This is the ideal followed by Valmiki in the entire epic in presenting various episodes.

The first challenging episode in the *Ramayana* is the most unexpected exile of Rama. The sequence of events taking a sudden turn from one extreme to the other naturally poses a problem to the poet in presenting the sharp reaction of various characters involved. Dasaratha was, perhaps the worst affected as he was the direct and the immediate target of Kaikeyi's cruel attack. He was helpless because neither Kaikeyi nor Rama could provide relief to him. He could have felt happy if Kaikeyi had withdrawn her demand or Rama had agreed to assert his legitimate right to the throne as suggested by Dasaratha himself. But neither of the two could happen because of the stern selfishness of Kaikeyi on one side and the sophisticated selflessness of Rama on the other. Adding to this dreadful dilemma in the royal chamber, an atmosphere of uncertainty and unrest develops outside even among the royal dignitaries waiting for the King to start the celebrations. The whole city is looking forward to the most pleasant moment. This strange situation presents a conflict in the minds of all concerned and a sharp contrast between what is going on in the palace and what the public outside is looking for. In fact when Rama proceeds towards the royal palace in response to a call from his father, the citizens almost block his way to have a glimpse into his radiant face and feel blessed when Rama looks at them. Valmiki presents this ironical situation with a creative imagination that brings out the best in the main characters—Rama, Dasaratha, Kaushalya, Sita and Lakshmana.

In his final attempt to dissuade Rama to stay back at least for a day, Dasaratha says :

अद्यत्विदानीं रजनीं पुत्र मा गच्छ सर्वथा।
एकाहं दर्शनिनापि साधु तावच्चराम्यहम्।।

(Stay with me at least for this night. Drop the idea of leaving me today in any case. I shall derive strength to stand this grief by seeing you at least this night.)

In fact Dasaratha wants Rama to drop the idea of leaving for the forests altogether as it was all contrived by his cruel wife Kaikeyi. He even goes to the extent of suggesting to Rama that he should take him into custody for submitting himself to the treacherous plans of his wife and ascend the throne in his own right. Reacting to this disturbed state of his father's mind which is again fully justified in its own way, Rama says :

प्राप्स्यामि यानद्य गुणान् को मे श्वस्तान् प्रदास्यति।
अपक्रमणमेवातः सर्वकामैरहं वृणे।।

(Who will grant me, my father, the merits due to me today by the immediate compliance with the order of the day, if I put it off for tomorrow. I should therefore prefer my instant departure to all other considerations and conveniences.)

In other words, Rama wants to make it clear that duty delayed is duty defered. But he is not discourteous to his father. He appeals to him with all reverence not to get agitated by the momentary grief and assures him that there is nothing to worry about him as he will make himself comfortable. He tells him again and again not to allow tears roll in his eyes and contain the grief within. Finally he tells his truthful father to stick to the word he has given to Kaikeyi and not to compromise with truth for his sake. Rama concludes his deliberation with universal truth that father is more respectable than all gods put together, say the scriptures (पिता हि दैवतं तात देवतानामपि स्मृतम्).

In spite of all this Dasaratha does not get reconciled. Vasishtha and Sumantra also take Kaikeyi to task and censure her with harsh words in the presence of Dasaratha. Even then Kaikeyi remains stubborn like a stone. She brings bark-garments for Rama, Sita and Lakshmana. Valmiki excels in his skill in depicting the conflict and contrast taking various turns at this moment of crisis. The dialogue between various characters is so balanced and just that none of them can forget the memorable words uttered by all others in this context and readers of Valmiki, of course, can ill-afford it.

The absence of Bharata from the scene makes him conspicuous and also accounts for the injustice done to the royal dignity and the family prestige. If he had been present in Ayodhya at the time of this proposal, this would not have happened at all. But for reasons best known to him, Dasaratha planned to have this in a hurry, knowing fully well that Bharata is away. Kaikeyi too did not want Rama to wait till Bharata returns to Ayodhya. In fact Rama was prepared to wait for him and wanted to see him enthroned in his presence and then leave for the forests. But when Kaikeyi felt nervous about it, he decided to implement her design without any delay. He only asked Kaikeyi to allow him time required to take leave of his mother. The mental background underlined in this silent motion is also carefully brought out by Valmiki through his code-language.

But on Bharata's return to Ayodhya after the worst has happened to the King, Kingdom and the family, another crisis more embarrassing than the exile of Rama marks the beginning of another conflict. Valmiki handles the situation with an artistic imagination. Bharata did not know what happened at Ayodhya till he returned. The messengers were cautioned not to reveal the fact to him. He was simply told that his presence was immediately required in Ayodhya and an auspicious time was eagerly awaiting his arrival. But intuitively, Bharata felt that there was something wrong somewhere and ultimately his apprehension came true when

his mother broke the shocking news to him slowly by stages. Bharata collapses physically and mentally on hearing the sudden demise of his father and the exile of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana over which Kaikeyi feel delighted and expects his beneficiary son Bharata to share the joy with her. The contrast between the two personalities—mother and son—is so vividly and touchingly brought out by Valmiki that the balance of emotions ensures the balance of truth and justice—the truth blindly followed by Kaikeyi to fulfil her selfish motive and the justice upheld by Dasaratha till his last breath and now taken by his noble son Bharata. Quite contrary to the expectations of Kaikeyi, Bharata condemns her stand outright and disowns her as she disowned her husband, family, society, Kingdom and the mankind. In a fit of anger (quite natural for any person however poised he may be), Bharata tells her not to speak to him hereafter (*na teham abhibhashyosmi*) and declares in clear terms that he is not going to fulfil her evil desire and instead he is going to bring Rama back to Ayodhya and install him on the throne. He says that, if necessary, he will undertake the forest life and request his brother to accept the Kingdom. No one in the royal family or outside perhaps expected Bharata to take such a drastic step towards his mother. But Rama knew that such a thing could happen. Perhaps Dasaratha was also apprehending such a situation. That is why he insisted that Rama should postpone his departure and that is the reason why Rama was keen to leave without delay. But among others, even the closest people suspected the intentions of Bharata and questioned him face to face. It was a painful ordeal for Bharata to face those enquiries and interrogations throughout his way to Chitrakoota where he was to meet Rama and convince him to return to Ayodhya.

Surprisingly the shower of arrows of suspicion were first sprung on the innocent soul Bharata by no less an intimate soul than Kaushalya. She made a direct attack and Bharata stood the test with humility, respect and regard for the

aggrieved mother. Kaushalya realised her mistake and embraced Bharata with tears of affection. Bharata had to clarify his stand with equal sincerity and simplicity to Vasishtha, Bharadwaja and Guha during his campaign to get back Rama to Ayodhya. Even Lakshmana suspects his brother Bharata seeing the huge army behind him. But Rama cools him down with an apt observation that Bharata would readily transfer the Kingdom to him if he so desires.

The Summit-Meet in Chitrakoota where the two noble souls try to exchange their notes on the propriety of their individual views regarding their father's intentions and the implicit orders issued by Kaikeyi on his behalf is a master-piece which can favourably be compared with any similar set-up in any outstanding epic of the world. The classical touch coupled with artistic excellence of the epic poet Valmiki reaches its perfection in conducting this meet with matchless modesty. It was here that silence commissioned by the competent comperer of cultural exchange becomes more eloquent than all the word-culture that the world can think. On the first evening when Rama and Bharata sit together amidst cultured audience, everybody looks forward eagerly to hear the two brothers. Bharata blooming with blissful brilliance in his face sits very close to his brother (*upopavishtah*) but with closed lips. With silence trying to break itself in vain, the whole night passes off with a big pause (शोचतामेव रजनी दुःखेन व्यत्यवर्तत).

The dialogue however starts the next morning. It was the day of Bharata (a *bharatiya* day) and Rama understands his language which is a typical example of *bharatiya bhasha*. The beauty behind the whole dispute between the two brothers is that it is based not on assertion of rights but on discharge of duties with a sense of dedication to truth and justice. Both the brothers argue in favour of the other and finally agree to differ on all points excepts on their insistance that truth and justice should both be satisfied. Ultimately the golden sandals of Rama accepted by Bharata as his brother's regal

representatives to rule the land till his return resolve the stalemate. It was a conflict between two levels of selflessness and both the stands remain outstanding till the end and also thereafter till Rama returns to Ayodhya after spending full fourteen years in the forest.

Valmiki however excels most in his poetic beauty in the fifth book of his epic which he calls *sundarakanda* (the book of beauty). This is also considered to be the most magnificent expression of the poetic genius of Valmiki from all angles—literary, cultural and spiritual. Hanuman's endeavour to identify Sita in a mysterious land dominated by the monstrous beings is virtually the discovery of truth in beauty and beauty in truth. The beauty that Sita personifies is not merely confined to the physical beauty but it portrays the beauty of the soul in a highly suggestive form. Valmiki glorifies this beauty by presenting a sharp contrast between the paragon and the parrots of beauty. Hanuman's quest for Sita compels him to pass through all the obscene surrounding in Ravana's bed-chamber. Valmiki presents a vivid picture of all this in order to highlight the spiritual splendour of the isolated beauty in Sita. The marvellous mental balance which Hanuman maintains throughout his quest is portrayed by the poet with meticulous care.

On seeing Mandodari, the most lovely figure in the whole gynaeceum, shining with golden lustre like Gowri, Hanuman mistakes her for Sita and immediately runs into ecstasy; but soon realises his error in judgement. He convinces himelf that Sita, the devoted wife of Rama, cannot be expected to rest like this and proceeds further to find out the real object of his quest. He conjures up an ideal picture of Janaki in his mind with a probing nose, shining teeth, scintillating smile and stainless face looking like a pleasant moon and at last he succeeds in identifying his ideal vision.

Valmiki's description of Hanuman's approach to the spot where this beauty was eagerly waiting for someone with a word of solace and hope is superb. Step by step Hanuman

moves from grove to grove leaping from leaf to leaf hiding himself with care and caution, sees a stream reflecting the first rays of the dawn, feels confident that Janaki fond of twilight-beauty is bound to reach that place wherever she is and finally locates her under the *ashoka*-tree. The sight of Janaki excites him and his mind immediately flies to Rama. The similes used by Valmiki to present an approximate word-portrait of the awe-inspiring and the auspicious looking lady are perhaps the best in any classical literature. A few lines will suffice:

सीतां पद्मपलाशाक्षीं मन्मथस्य रतिं यथा।
इच्छां सर्वस्य जगतः पूर्णचंद्रप्रभामिव।।
भूमौ सुतनुमासीनां नियतामिव तापसीम्।
निःश्वास बहुलां भीरुं भुजगेंद्रवधूमिव।।
शोकजालेन महता विततेन न राजतीम्।
संसक्तां धूमजालेन शिखामिव विभावसोः।
तां स्मृतीमिव संदिग्धां ऋद्धिं निपतितामिव।
विहतामिव च श्रद्धां आशां प्रतिहतामिव।।
सोपसर्गां यथा सिद्धिं बुद्धिं सकलुषामिव।
अभूतेनापवादेन कीर्तिं निपतितामिव।।
- - - - - - - - - - - -
आम्नायानामयोगेन विद्यां प्रशिथिलामिव।।
दुःखेन बुबुधे सीतां हनूमाननलंकृताम्।
संस्कारेण कथाहीनां वाचमर्थांतरंगताम्।।

(Seeing the lady with eyes resembling the lotus-petals, looking like Rati, the spouse of cupid, the god of love, delightful for the whole world like the light of the full moon, seated on the ground like an ascetic lady with tender limbs, hissing hard like the queen of serpents, clouded by intense grief like the flame covered by thick smoke, distressed like the holy text with doubtful meaning, the excellence that has been cast away, the faith that has been shattered, the hope frustrated, the

attainment obstructed, the intelligence polluted, and the reputation marred by absurd scandals, Hanuman argues with himself that this must be the lady he has been looking for all the time as she is looking like learning weakened by lack of coordination between various disciplines and the human expression deviating from its substance due to lack of culture.)

The entire thought-process of Hanuman from the moment he sees Sita and convinces himself that she is indeed the noble wife of Rama finds an exhilerating expression in the voice of Valmiki. The word-culture (*vak-samskriti*) which Valmiki advocates whenever occasion arises finds ample illustrations in his celebrated work, *the Ramayana.* Almost all his characters including less cultured ones like Shurpanakha are experts in the art of expression. One can read the characters through the words they use. Valmiki tries to define them through designating words like *satya parakrama* (With truth as strenghth for Rama, *lakshmi vardhana* (Promoter of prosperity) for Lakshmana, *bhratri vatsala* (an affectionate brother) for Bharata, *satya sandha* (dedicated to truth) for Dasaratha, *mantra kovida* (master of the mystic expression) for Sumantra, *nitya shankita* (consistantly suspicious) for Sugriva and *loka ravana* (the world-teaser) for Ravana.

There are certain words and phrases which Valmiki is very fond of and which assume special dimensions in his hands. For instance, the word *pratishtha* used by him in his very first *sloka* starting with *ma nishada* has a special connotation which we realise when Sumantra uses the same word, of course, in verb form (*pratishthasyati*) referring to the sufference of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana during their period of exile which is going to create an epoch in the history of mankind. He says, *idam hi charitam loke pratishthasyati sasvatam* (this event is going to last long in the world of values). Thus there is a link between the usage of certain words on various occasions. This is just an example.

Though simple and direct, Valmiki's language has a fascinating drive which makes the sound and sense move together making the poetic appreciation or the experience of

the aesthetic essence immediately accessible even to the common reader. One example will do. When Hanuman brings the happiest news that Sita has been seen, the monkeys celebrate the occasion with an exciting attack on Madhuvana, the most beloved grove near the Kishkindha. A few lines from this picturesque description sound as follows:

ततश्चानुमता: सर्वे प्रहृष्टा काननौकस: ।
मुदिताश्च ततस्ते च प्रनृत्यंति ततस्तत: ।।

गायन्ति केचित् प्रहसन्ति केचित्
नृत्यन्ति केचित् प्रणमन्ति केचित् ।
पतन्ति केचित् प्रचरन्ति केचित्
प्लवन्ति केचित् प्रलपन्ति केचित् ।।

परस्परं केचिदुपाश्रयन्ति
परस्परं केचिदतिब्रुवन्ति ।
द्रुमाद् द्रुमं केचिदभिद्रवन्ति
क्षितौ नगाग्रान्नियतन्ति केचित् ।।

(Having been permitted to go ahead with the sportive celebration, the monkeys delighted in their hearts started dancing and singing wherever they were standing at the time of getting the green signal from their leader. Then some started singing, some others laughing, others dancing, some other greeting each other, some falling down voluntarily, some others hawking with gait, some jumping and some others indulging in loose talk. Some leaned against one another, others indulged in excessive talk, some others jumped from one branch to the other and some climbed up a hill and fell down to their own excitement.)

Besides human nature, the natural beauty of the landscape and the cyclic movement of the seasons also receive a remarkable treatment in the hands of Valmiki. The description of the river Ganga occurs in two places—first in *balakanda* when Vishwamitra narrates the story of the descent of the river and again when the trinity—Rama, Sita and Lakshmana

cross the river. The soul-elevating surroundings of the mountain Chitrakoota are also portrayed in a picturesque way. Anasuya describes the change of atmosphere after the sunset and leaves a word of caution to Sita to be careful about the possible dangers in the Dandaka forest. The description of the lake Pampa and the Matanga Vana of Sabari has a spiritual overtone apart from their natural beauty. Among the seasons described by Valmiki, the rainy season and the autumn are very impressive as they reflect the mental set up of Rama. Both Rama and Lakshmana often make a reference to the celestial phenomenon and these references if properly analysed make an interesting study to understand Valmiki's views on astronomy. For instance, the marriages of Rama and his three brothers take place when the moon was in *uttara phalguni*, a constellation said to be good for marriage according to Janaka. Rama starts his march for war on *hasta* (a constellation supposed to bring victory). Lakshmana sees *visakha* in the sky on their way towards Lanka and says that this star is very favourable for the Ikshvakus. There are many such references in the *Ramayana* which have their own significance. The later versions of *Ramayana* did not closely follow Valmiki in this respect.

In *sundarakanda*, the moon becomes a character. When Hanuman enters Lanka, the full-moon ascends the eastern horizon to guide and assist him in his quest for Sita. Valmiki describes this assistance as *sachivyan* (secretaryship in the modern sense). It looks as if the moon has been commissioned by gods to help Hanuman in his noble cause. The way Valmiki describes the rising of the moon is highly suggestive of something deeper than mere celestial phenomenon. He says that the blissful evening graced by the grand advent of the full bloom of the moon has dispelled the darkness of the night and with it the dark deeds of the meat-eaters of the land and the celestial splendour of the divine light has purified the minds of all engrossed in the temporal pleasures of the world as if a pleasant breeze has come from the pure hearted Rama to sanctify the land.

The epic expressions like this are in abundance—almost in all the cantos of the *Ramayana*. The voice of Valmiki serves on all such occasions as an effective medium of his epic vision. The effortless harmony between voice and vision is what makes Valmiki a matchless master of exhilarating experience and elegant expression.

*Seven*

# The Message

The medium and the message are both equally important for any epic poet and Valmiki has done full justice to both. Like the art of expression which expresses itself most effectively when the artist is not conscious of it, the communication of the real content casts itself on a wide canvas when it is 'commissioned' and not 'contemplated'. This is what exactly happened with Valmiki. He never thought that his sincere concern for the pair of birds separted by a cruel shot would result in the *magnum opus* advocating the basic human qualities like love and compassion. But to his own surprise, it assumed the form of a world classic with a world of message for all time to come and for all living beings.

**Man-making** and **non-killing** are the two main themes that emerge from the subject-matter of the *Ramayana*. Valmiki derives inspiration for advocating these two basic virtues from the pleasant and placid river-water and the tragic scene of the innocent bird separated from its partner. These two incidents therefore form the backdrop for the entire story as narrated by Valmiki.

Being a pastmaster in the art of epic expression, Valmiki never sermonizes nor is he didactic. He makes his characters speak for him and for themselves through their action, words and thoughts. Even they prefer action to articulation. There are, however, some generalisations and observations relating to righteous conduct; but they emerge from the events in the most natural way. There are ideal characters like Rama,

Bharata, Lakshmana, Sita, Sumitra, Sumantra, Guha, Jatayu, Sabari and Hanuman, who serve as models for various human qualities. They make the readers exclaim, 'Here is an ideal son, an affectionate father, a loving brother, a faithful wife, a polished lady who has nothing to complain and is always ready to help others, an intelligent and encouraging advisor and associate, a friend in need, a guardian who cares more for his master than for his life, an ascetic who aspires for nothing but absolute bliss, an accomplished man of action with unqualified devotion and dedication to duty.'

The *Ramayana* is essentially a family-epic. It recognises family as the foundation for social harmony, human dignity and universal brotherhood. There are three types of brothers depicted in the epic—Rama and Bharata, Vali and Sugriva and Ravana and Vibhishana. Similarly there are three couples representing different categories of life-partnership. Rama and Sita symbolise perfect union of hearts, Vali and Tara have less in common and Ravana and Mandodari have nothing in common except their objective, admiration and affection for each other in spite of their ideological differences. All the three ladies—Sita, Tara and Mandodari are highly devoted to their husbands. Of the three, Sita is the most admired, but undergoes the worst suffering from the worldly point of view. Tara is the happiest and Mandodari is the most modest. Their temperament, behaviour and ideology can provide guiding principles for men and women throughout the world. It is paradoxical that Sita and Rama are worshipped as the ideal divine couple by many of the orthodox Hindu families; but no couple perhaps would like to lead a life which they lived. That shows how the human suffering gets sublimated in these two characters. Sufferance becomes penance if it promotes universal well-being. This is the message conveyed by the sage Valmiki in his epic, the *Ramayana.*

The *Ramayana* also explains how families, societies and nations can be saved from dreadful disasters by maintaining emotional equilibrium. Rama and Bharata saved Ayodhya

and the royal family from a catastrophe triggered off by Kaikeyi. Vibhishana rehabilitated Lanka with a foresight and Hanuman re-established law and order in Kishkindha by diplomatic wisdom and dynamic vision. Great rulers like Janaka, Dasaratha, Bharata and Rama provide practical guidance to the administrators all over the world in matters of man-management. Bad administrators like Ravana and Vali also serve as object lessons to the masses cautioning them against the evil effects of ill-planned and rashly executed statesmanship. Thus the *Ramayana* is also a hand-book of human resource development for the custodians of peace and prosperity.

There is yet another aspect which takes the theme of the *Ramayana* beyond the mundane world and places it on a higher plane. That is the spiritual angle. It is believed that the Vedic message and the maxims have beeen handed over to mankind through the *Ramayana*, by Valmiki—endowed with Vedic vision and epic expression. There are innumerable passages in the *Ramayana* which sound like Vedic hymns conveying the cosmic concord between the life herein and hereafter. The whole of *sundarakanda* is a treasure-house of such expressions. Rama addresses the august assemblage of sages, soldiers, mothers, brothers and loyal countrymen who have come all the way from Ayodhya to Chitrakoot to persuade Rama to come back to Ayodhya. This sermon, though short, presents a specimen of such expressions. For those who wish to go deep into these deliberations interwoven with the main stream of the epic narration, the *Ramayana* is a monumental document for serious study. In fact this first poetic expression of the sage has provided inspiration to innumerable writers and still continues to be a model for word-culture.

Even for a common man, Valmiki presents examples of word-culture and its role in handling day to day problems in life. Valmiki frequently uses words like *vakyajna, vakya visharada, vakya kovida, vak-sarathi, vagvidamvara* only to

emphasise the significance of speech in daily life. If only one can cultivate this basic art of articulation for proper presentation of thoughts, most of the problems—domestic, social, national and even global can be solved. The pious lady Sita enquires of Ravana, in a casual way, whether there is none in Lanka who can advise him to behave himself or wonders if in spite of sound advice he is turning a deaf ear. This is an eternal question to which all responsible persons should address themselves. This word-culture finds a prominent place in the *Ramayana* of Valmiki.

Generally speaking there are two distinct types of culture presented in the *Ramayana*—the culture of acquisition and consumption and the culture of restraint and composure. The first one takes its roots from Ravana, depicted as *dasamukha*, the ten-faced and the second one draws its origin from *dasaratha*, one who drives in ten chariots in ten directions. These two antithetical cultures are always opposed and pose a problem to world-peace. The *Ramayana* advocates a balanced approach to the problem. Lanka, Kishkindha and Ayodhya present three different situations of the same problem and in all the three instances, a balance was struck by cultured persons like Rama, Bharata, Sugriva and Vibhishana. This conflict of cultures poses not merely a problem but a threat to human security and prosperity and the *Ramayana* presents a solution to it.

There are various other cultures also depicted in the *Ramayana* ranging from the Vedic culture down to the vulture culture. But the surprising thing is that Valmiki elevates even the vultures (Jatayu and Sampati) to the highest level of the spirit of selfless service and sacrifice. Besides the human culture, we have the nature-culture also nurtured by the sage Valmiki. The five elements— space, air, fire, water and land—are personified in the *Ramayana*. The Ikshvakus belong to the clan of the Sun-god who figures in the battlefield and brings victory to Rama. Sugriva is also presented as the off-spring of Sun while Vali belongs to Indra. Hanuman takes his birth from the wind god. The fire-god appears before Rama

and all others assembled in Lanka at the time of the fire-ordeal of Sita and testifies the chastity of Sita. The sea appears in human form before Rama to apologise for his helplessness but suggests a way out to find his way through the waters. Mother Earth is the mother of Sita who is discovered from the earth and merges into the earth in the end. Valmiki presents these five elements as characters—visible and invisible—with his poetic imagination just to make the readers understand the importance of the symbiotic interaction of man with nature.

The message of the *Ramayana* to the mankind is manifold. Viewed from any angle, this celebrated work has much to say—much more than what men and women, birds and animals, and all living beings can expect from it. It is an epic for all-relevant and resplendent at any point of time or space. It is a universal epic with eternal values which concern life in all its dimensions.

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